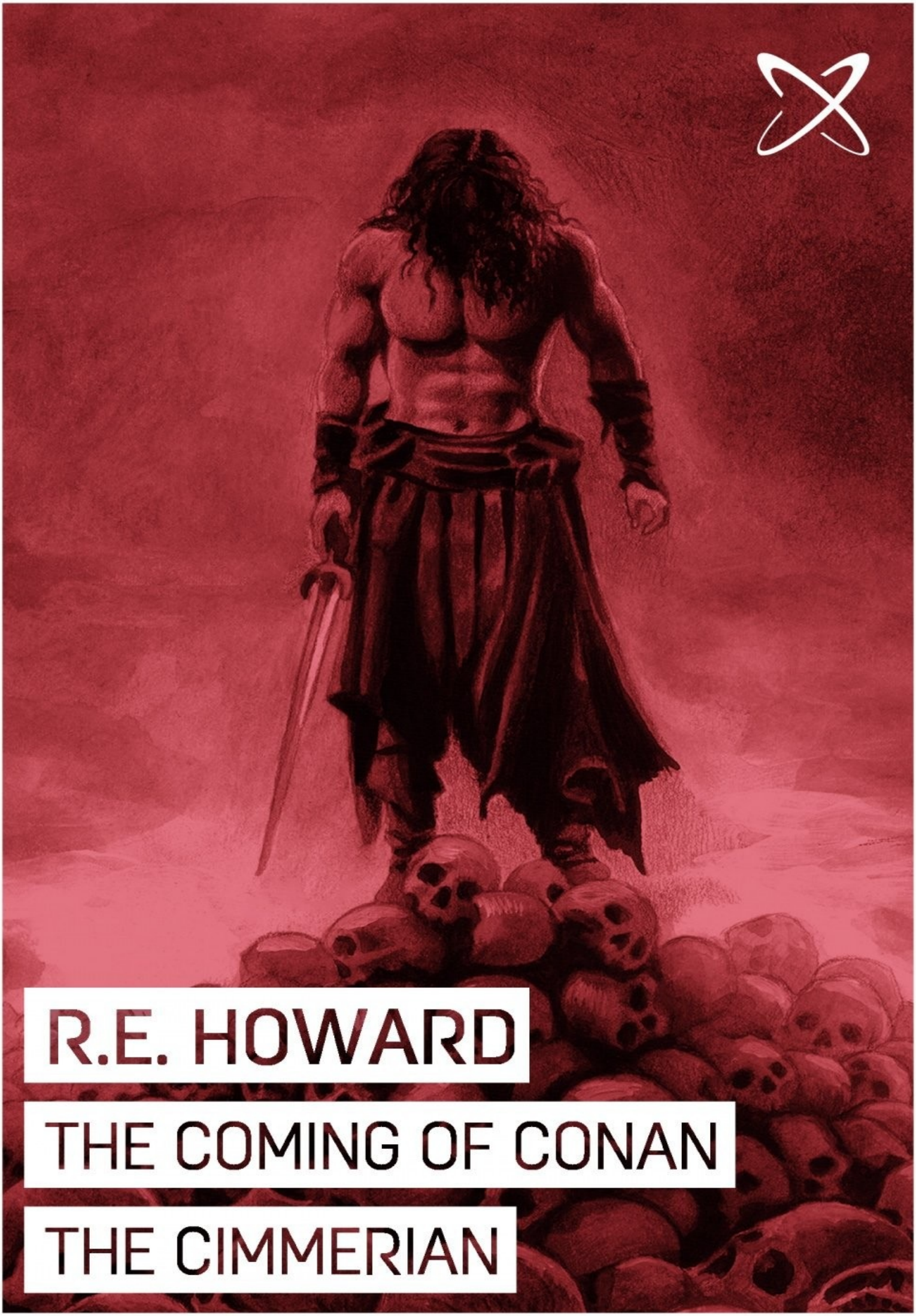
R.E. HOWARD
THE COMING OF CONAN
THE CIMMERIAN

The Coming of Conan The Cimmerian

Robert E. Howard

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The Coming of Conan The Cimmerian

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Foreword

Well. It’s been a long haul.

As I sit here, reviewing the drawings and paintings I contribute to this book, the work of well over a year and a half – I must admit to mixed emotions.

It’s easy enough to know that you are up to the job of capturing the visual essence of the most famous creation of one of your favorite authors, a literary lodestone that has repeatedly drawn you back since childhood, so long as you don’t actually have to execute those visuals. Believe me, there have been many, many times in the last thirty plus years when I’ve indulged in the

“what if” game – and every time been very impressed with the perfect phantom illustrations of Conan misting through the world behind my eyelids.

But when it comes time to belly up to the bar, put your money where your mouth is, and actually make concrete all the notions and grand designs that have previously flitted through your happily uncommitted mind – aye, there’s the rub...

Robert E. Howard’s Conan has not been so easy to illustrate as I imagined he would be. I think this is in part because, while Conan and his Hyborian Age are nominally works of epic heroism, featuring hosts of brave warriors, fields of savage battle, and deeds of strength and bravery and derring-do as is the tradition of heroic fantasy, what makes them great is a deeper, darker context. Howard wrote them in a personalized style that is very post-heroic, is very much a part of a twentieth-century literary tradition which eschews the floridity, gallantry and nobleness of cause associated with the epic.

Howard took the nominal elements of heroic fiction, but he did not write them with the genteel sensibilities typically associated with the form. Hell no – he took those elements as sheep’s skin under which to fit his own agenda, which included railing at his personal circumstances; letting loose with a literary snarl and bark at the limitations and frustrations of the world he knew – isolated central Texas post oak scrubland and oil field.

What I’m trying to get at is that while Howard’s Conan stories live in the framework of classic heroic fantasy, their guts – the heart that drives the beast – is a much more personal sensibility.

They are engineered and pushed forward at Howard’s famous driving pace by a gritty directness and stripped-down, take-no-prisoners attitude that is unique to Howard; an expression of his rage at his immediate world. Howard’s writing is not fast and furious and grim merely because he liked it that way, rather it is fast and furious and grim because that was a true expression of who Howard was. Howard’s genius was that he took literary forms that appealed to him and added to them and subtracted from them and molded them into entities 6

that darkly reflected his deeply felt personal beliefs; his view of life as unending struggle and ultimate futility. But providing one hell of a ride along the way, if you were lucky.

We are lucky because we get the Old World tradition of the heroic epic as interpreted through the sensibilities of a Texan steeped in the lore of his home state – the violent history of its blood feuds and Indian wars, as well as its rich Southern United States folk storytelling tradition, with all its ghosts and swampy horror.

That mix made for something new, and for one hell of a ride, but it has also, for me, made Conan a bit difficult to visually interpret – to get back to my original chain of thought. On one hand I'm drawn to Howard's vivid descriptions of pageantry and stateliness, the awesome sweep and grandeur of the Hyborian Age, Conan's story as epic, and my desire is to do all that justice by hewing to the finest traditions of classic illustration. On the other hand, it is Howard's New World spontaneity, his white-hot emotional explosiveness and relentless pacing that make these stories tick, that give them life far beyond that of their contemporaries, and to properly capture that calls for visuals that are bold, immediate, and raw.

There is no mistaking a Howard story. No one will ever write Conan, or any other sword and sorcery creation, with the ferocity and terrible beauty of Howard. There will never be a true Conan that was not written by Howard. Conan is too personal a creation, all wrapped up in Howard's own strengths and foibles and idiosyncrasies, and that makes it easy to see why Conan is by far Howard's best known creation.

Howard was all about story first and foremost – there's no dishonor in that – but with Conan he seems to have arrived at a point in his growth as a fictioneer where he appreciated the importance of developing a fully-rounded lead.

The general public will enjoy a particular literary concept, featuring an imaginative world revolving around a well-turned plot, once or twice, but if the author wants them to return again and again to that world, he needs it anchored by an attractive and unique character who is more than just a construct. Howard got that with Conan, pulling personality from the Texas country roughnecks he well knew, and created a series of stories that in popularity have eclipsed all his other fine worlds.

In Conan we get that rarity in fantastic literature, a hero who actually changes and grows from story to story. The teenage, insecure Conan who kills a man for taunting him in *The Tower of the Elephant* is not the same headstrong bully who has his heart broken in *The Queen of the Black Coast* is not the same veteran mercenary who begins to understand that maybe he has it in him

to go all the way in *Black Colossus* is not the same Conan who as king patronizes the arts (the arts, for Crom's sake!), recognizing that poetry will live long after he is gone, in *The Phoenix on the Sword*.

Conan grows and matures, and more's the pity that the popular view of the character is largely restricted to that of a scowling, jaw-clenched, muscle-bound killing machine. Howard wrote him as so much more. Yes, he brawls and slays, but he also reflects and laughs – at himself as well as others – loves and loses, doubts and falters, acts altruistically and empathizes with alien beings. He is, above all, totally charismatic; no outsider comes to command armies and nations without inspiring trust and loyalty and devotion. He's no simple brute; he's a multidimensional character, and I've done my best to reflect that, depicting him in a variety of moods and attitudes.

Not every one of the stories in this volume is great. Howard was writing for monthly publication at a white-hot pace, and perfection is never possible under those circumstances.

Even so, even such minor efforts as *The Vale of Lost Women* offer passages of wonderfully turned prose – check out Livia's view of the slaughter in the village for as compelling and compact a portrait of the horror of massacre as is seen in fiction, or the description of ghostly lunar beauty in Livia's descent into the haunted vale.

But the bulk of these stories are great, and *The Tower of the Elephant* and *The Queen of the Black Coast* are indisputable classics of fantastic short fiction, richly deserving recognition and appreciation outside the genre.

The man could write, and Conan is Howard at the top of his game. My hope is that, if you do not care for my interpretations of his words, you are able to look beyond them, and enjoy Conan and his world, and Howard's stirring prose, from the perspective of your inner eye.

Mark Schultz

2002

The Coming of Conan The Cimmerian

Introduction

When the December 1932 issue of Weird Tales appeared on newsstands, Robert E. Howard (1906-1936) probably didn't imagine that he was making history. The Phoenix on the Sword, introducing his new character, Conan of Cimmeria, had been written in March of that year, and even if editor Farnsworth Wright thought the story had "points of real excellence," it was not enough to warrant making it the cover story. The first Conan story was simply one tale among others in that particular issue of Weird Tales.

Seventy years later, the character has achieved international fame. Virtually every country in the world has published the Conan tales. One success leading to another, the character has been featured in motion pictures, comic books, cartoons, pastiches, television series, toys and role-playing games. In the process, Howard's creation has been diluted to the point that it is often nearly impossible to recognize Howard's character in the iconic image of the fur-clad, hyper-muscled super-hero he has become in the public's mind. Such a phenomenon is not rare in the history of popular culture. When a fictional character becomes such an icon, it is bound to escape its creator and take on a life of its own, the character taking precedence over the creator.

Dracula, Fu Manchu and Tarzan are instantly recognizable figures, while creators Bram Stoker, Sax Rohmer and Edgar Rice Burroughs enjoy a popularity both inferior to and dependent upon these particular creations. As an example, many Burroughs readers had their first exposure to Tarzan by way of the movies or comic strips and were subsequently led to buy the original books. They could then judge for themselves whether the adaptations were faithful to the original. In Howard's case, however, this has been impossible: until the present publication, Howard's Conan stories had never been published as Howard wrote them, in the order in which he wrote them, in a uniform collection.

While there is nothing inherently wrong with the idea of establishing a character's

"biography," no Sherlock Holmes scholar ever entertained the idea of repackaging Conan Doyle's original stories in the order of their occurrence in Holmes' life rather than the order in which they were written, or inserting pastiches amidst the established canon. This was, however, exactly what was done with the Conan stories: not only were they presented following someone else's reconstruction of the character's "biography," but pastiches of arguable

quality (to say the least) were interpolated among Howard's tales. Further, some of Howard's own stories were rewritten, other non-Conan Howard tales were artificially transformed into Conan ones, and Conan stories that Howard thought too little of to finish were completed by other writers. This whole concept of "posthumous collaboration," as it was termed, made it very difficult for the casual reader to determine what was genuine Howard and what was poor aping or rewriting in those volumes. In other words, people lured to Howard's Conan stories after encountering adaptations or pastiches simply found more of the same, not having detailed information to separate the wheat from the tares. This has made critical assessment of the Conan stories a difficult thing: the Texan has often been judged on writings 9

that were either not his or had been tampered with.

Howard himself suggested why the stories should not be presented in the order they occurred in the character's life: "In writing these yarns I've always felt less as creating them than as if I were simply chronicling his adventures as he told them to me. That's why they skip about so much, without following a regular order. The average adventurer, telling tales of a wild life at random, seldom follows any ordered plan, but narrates episodes widely separated by space and years, as they occur to him." Consequently, the stories in this volume are published as they

"occurred" to Howard, in the order they were written and as they were written by Howard – no pastiches, no changes for the sake of "consistency," no rewriting. Such a presentation not only respects Howard's intentions, it also casts a very different light on the character and his evolution, and provides us with new insights to some of the major themes of the series.

At the time the December 1932 issue of Weird Tales went on sale, Howard was becoming one of the magazine's pillars. The magazine had published the Texan's first professional story, Spear and Fang, in July 1925, and over the years his tales had been appearing with increasing frequency between its covers. He had won his first cover with Wolfshead in the April 1926

issue and had introduced the fan-favorite character Solomon Kane with Red Shadows in August 1928, again featured on the cover. A year later Howard had won the admiration and respect of his peers, most notably Howard Phillips Lovecraft, with his two stories about Kull of Atlantis, The Shadow Kingdom and The Mirrors of Tuzun Thune, published in the August and September 1929 issues.

It can be said that Robert E. Howard had been a protégé of Weird Tales editor Farnsworth Wright. Wright nurtured the young Texan's burgeoning talent and would later describe him as one of his "literary discoveries," as well as a "genius" and a "friend." Wright was indeed an unusual editor. In a world of formula and cliché-ridden pulp magazines, Weird Tales often lived up to its subtitle, "The Unique Magazine," walking a fine line between the magazine's commercial imperatives and Wright's literary inclinations. While Lovecraft would often have his tales rejected, unable or unwilling to submit to Wright's editorial requirements or suggestions, Howard was more flexible. Studying and anticipating his editors' needs, he had no problem turning out dozens of formula stories – with the occasional gem here and there – for such generic magazines as Fight Stories or Action Stories. On the other hand the Texan had genuine literary leanings, most evident in his poetry, but for which there was no viable market.

Weird Tales came at the right time for the young writer. This atypical magazine published a large number of Howard's poems as well as the cream of his fiction: the tales of Solomon Kane, Kull, Bran Mak Morn and Conan the Cimmerian. Not coincidentally, of all his rather numerous characters, Howard wrote poems about only those four (if we accept Cimmeria as a poem about Conan's homeland). The Texan was evidently more involved when writing Conan tales than he was when writing for more generic markets.

It is significant to note that the first Conan story was a rewrite of a Kull story, By This Axe I 10

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Rule!, completed in 1929. Like the Conan tales, the Kull stories were centered around the exploits of a barbarian adventurer in exotic countries of Earth's mythical past, but there ends the similarity: between 1929 and 1932, Howard had developed new ambitions for his fantasy stories. He had, first of all, succeeded in selling some historical fiction, which gave him the occasion to write on the epic scale. Howard infused those stories with an intensity that has been rarely equaled, delivering memorable tales of the later Crusades. He excelled at depicting the slow decay of the once-powerful empire of Outremer, crumbling under internal divisions and external attacks, a prevalent theme of the future Conan stories.

Selling historical fiction on a regular basis, however, proved to be an arduous task. Of his interest in the genre and difficulties in the market Howard wrote in 1933 : "There is no literary work, to me, half as zestful as rewriting history

in the guise of fiction. I wish I was able to devote the rest of my life to that kind of work…. I could never make a living writing such things, though; the markets are too scanty, with requirements too narrow, and it takes me so long to complete one. I try to write as true to the actual facts as possible, at least, I try to commit as few errors as possible. I like to have my background and setting as accurate and realistic as I can, with my limited knowledge; if I twist facts too much, alter dates as some writers do, or present a character out of keeping with my impressions of the time and place, I lose my sense of reality, and my characters cease to be living and vital things; and my stories center entirely on my conceptions of my characters. Once I lose the 'feel' of my characters, I might as well tear up what I have written."

All these elements were probably at the back of Howard's mind in February 1932 when he transformed By This Axe I Rule! into The Phoenix on the Sword. By dropping the love-interest of the former story and adding a weird touch to his revision, Howard knew what he was doing: unlike his previous series, the first Conan tale was tailored specifically to meet Weird Tales'

requirements. However, taking control of the marketing aspects of the story was one thing; keeping in check the creative forces that brought the barbarian character to life was another entirely: "the man Conan seemed suddenly to grow up in my mind without much labor on my part and immediately a stream of stories flowed off my pen – or rather, off my typewriter –

almost without effort on my part. I did not seem to be creating, but rather relating events that had occurred. Episode crowded on episode so fast that I could scarcely keep up with them. For weeks I did nothing but write of the adventures of Conan. The character took complete possession of my mind and crowded out everything else in the way of story-writing."

With a first story featuring Conan as the middle-aged king of Aquilonia, a second as a young barbarian in the northern fringes of the world and a third as a young barbarian thief in the civilized city of Numalia, different periods of the character's life and widely scattered geographic locations in each case, Howard was running the risk of losing himself in this character and his universe. This had happened with the Kull stories, in which the loss of Howard's "sense of reality" is discernible. He thus decided to have his "background and setting

… accurate and realistic."

The creation of a self-coherent universe was the perfect solution to Howard's needs and aspirations. His decision to people his Hyborian Age with Cimmerians, Vanirs, Nemedians and Afghulis, thinly-disguised names borrowed from history or legendry, was never really understood. Years later, Lovecraft would take Howard to task for this: "the only flaw in this stuff is R.E.H.'s incurable tendancy to devise names too closely resembling actual names –

names which, for us, have a very different set of associations." Lovecraft, and a host of others after him, couldn't see that Howard never intended to create a universe removed from our own, as he had done when writing the Kull stories and as so many writers of epic fantasy have done since. By carefully choosing names that resembled those found in our history and legendry, Howard wanted to ensure that no reader would be left wondering what a Turanian looked like, or be unaware that his Vanir and Æsir lived in the northern parts of the world. By telescoping history and geography to create a universe that was new and yet familiar, Howard was deliberately striving for efficacy and stereotype, a technique that allowed him to create an exotic background with a minimum of description. He was at the same time answering his own need to have an "accurate and realistic" background for the series, while creating a method for writing (pseudo-)historical tales without the risk of anachronism or factual errors. The first three Conan stories, completed before The Hyborian Age was written, may be seen as experimental efforts, before Howard had a firm grasp of his character's environment and of the new series' potential. It was with his fourth and fifth offerings – The Tower of the Elephant and The Scarlet Citadel – that Howard added this epic and (pseudo-)historical dimension to his new series. From this point onward, the Conan stories became something more than the adventures of a barbarian adventurer in an imaginary kingdom, as had been the case with the Kull stories. From story to story, Conan could be a king in Medieval Europe (The Scarlet Citadel), a general in an antique Assyria torn with rivalries between city-states (Black Colossus), or a member of the wild kozaks – the term is transparent enough – of the East. As Howard once wrote: "My study of history has been a continual search for newer barbarians, from age to age." With the creation of the Hyborian Age, he had offered himself a universe where all those barbarian peoples could co-exist in the same time-frame, and in Conan the Cimmerian the perfect vehicle to express his views on barbarism and civilization.

In many of these stories, the Cimmerian finds himself in one of the

borderlands of the Hyborian Age where barbarism and civilization clash on an epic scale, with armies numbering in the tens of thousands. These large-scale battles find an echo in incidents of a more private order, often providing the stories with memorable scenes and lines of dialogue, such as Conan's recounting his trial in Queen of the Black Coast: "I choked my ire and held my peace, and the judge squalled that I had shown contempt for the court, and that I should be hurled into a dungeon to rot until I betrayed my friend. So then, seeing they were all mad, I drew my sword and cleft the judge's skull"; or Howard's acerbic aside in The Tower of the Elephant:

"Civilized men are more discourteous than savages because they know they can be impolite without having their skulls split, as a general thing."

Manifestly, the majority of Howard's work – and the Conan tales in particular – can be read as 12

an exploration of the theme of "Barbarism versus Civilization," with Howard standing firmly on the barbarians' side. This deep-rooted interest fueled Howard's writings from the beginning and became the major theme of discussion in the Texan's correspondence with Lovecraft, initiated in 1930. Confronted by the erudite writer from Providence, Howard found himself forced to back his opinions with historical and political data; consequently the Conan tales quite often echo ideas expressed in the correspondence and vice-versa. More aware than anyone else of Howard's positions and convictions, Lovecraft was in a privileged position to fully appreciate the Conan tales and their subtext. Shortly after Howard's death, Lovecraft thus wrote: "It is hard to describe precisely what made Mr. Howard's stories stand out so sharply; but the real secret is that he himself is in every one of them." The perceptive author here touched upon a major key to the Conan series – explaining at the same time the "internal force and sincerity" of the tales, and the reason no Conan pastiche could ever hope to attain the level of the original stories. If Howard's Conan tales make for particularly well-crafted escapist fiction, providing the reader with colorful high-adventure stories, the best of them deliver much more. A grim undercurrent pervades the whole series, often leaving the reader with mixed emotions, the sensation of having experienced something at once exhilarating and depressing.

Howard's best Conan stories – we may cite The Tower of the Elephant, Queen of the Black Coast, Beyond the Black River and Red Nails – are also those that have a sad ending: dark undercurrents flow beneath the veneer of

this “escapist” fiction.

Conan’s philosophy is best expressed in one passage from Queen of the Black Coast: “In this world men struggle and suffer vainly, finding pleasure only in the bright madness of battle …

Let me live deep while I live; let me know the rich juices of red meat and stinging wine on my palate, the hot embrace of white arms, the mad exultation of battle when the blue blades flame and crimson, and I am content. Let teachers and priests and philosophers brood over questions of reality and illusion. I know this: if life is illusion, then I am no less an illusion, and being thus, the illusion is real to me. I live, I burn with life, I love, I slay, and am content.”

This is indeed one of the major characteristics of the Cimmerian. He lives for the moment, savoring each instant, not caring about the past, nor about the future. Yesterday a kozak, today a king, tomorrow a thief. It is in that sense that the Conan stories are escapist literature: their appeal seems universal, transcending generations and cultures. As Howard once confided: “A man reading [a] story about Conan, then, would feel again in the depth of his being those barbaric impulses; consequently, Conan acted as they felt they would act in similar circumstances.” What sets the Conan stories apart, however, is the distinct sensation that the thrill of adventure in these stories is but a mask, that it is in fact never really possible to forget the grim realities of the world. Conan’s Hyborian Age began with a cataclysm and ended with another cataclysm. Whatever the Hyborians – and Conan – can accomplish, has no meaning at all in the final analysis, and is eventually bound to destruction and oblivion. Human life and empires are equally transient in Howard. Civilization is not the final phase of human development; it may be an “inevitable consequence” of that development, but it is a transitory state: civilizations are bound to wither and decay, eventually to be swept over by conquering 13

hordes of savages or barbarians who will themselves, after a time, become civilized....

In this cycle, it was with the state of barbarism that Howard recognized his kinship. This was not a case, as some commentators have argued, of belief in the superiority of barbarism over civilization or of a conception of the barbarian as a “Noble Savage”: “I have no idyllic view of barbarism – as near as I can learn it’s a grim, bloody, ferocious and loveless condition. I have no

patience with the depiction of the barbarian of any race as a stately, god-like child of Nature, endowed with strange wisdom and speaking in measured and sonorous phrases."

Probably the best metaphor of barbaric life as envisioned by Howard is found in Beyond the Black River, where the protagonists are caught between hammer and anvil: beyond their settlement and the Black River dwell the savage Picts, ready to attack them at any moment; behind it and Thunder River are the forces of civilization, too decadent and divided among themselves to ensure their own survival, much less that of their frontiers. The tale carries this grim predicament to its logical conclusion and Conan, the only one of the characters born into barbarism rather than civilization, is the sole survivor. The civilizing process had severed Conan's allies from their instincts, and not having this elemental aspect, inborn in the Cimmerian, they could not hope to prevail. The tale's concluding lines – without a doubt Howard's most quoted statement – attest to that: "Barbarism is the natural state of mankind…

Civilization is unnatural. It is a whim of circumstance. And barbarism must always ultimately triumph." The civilizing process bears in itself the seeds of its own destruction by removing itself from what is natural. What is "unnatural" cannot endure: it will either succumb to

"natural" forces, as described in Beyond the Black River, or it will slowly decay and destroy itself in a horrible fashion, as exemplified in Xuthal of the Dusk and Red Nails. The reasons behind Howard's fascination with the theme of decaying civilizations, which may very well be at the root of his interest in barbaric life, were probably very complex. Much more than in the evolutionist theories of the time which the stories sometimes echo, it is probably in Howard's biography and psychology that the answer resides. There is indeed something intensely personal in these convictions, which transcends the stories and contributes to much of their strength.

There is no denying that not all the Conan stories are on the same level as those we have mentioned. In a time of financial difficulties, it soon became easy enough for Howard to make of Conan his meal ticket. Most of the more routine Conan stories – systematically featuring semi-naked ladies, which had been entirely absent from the series until then – were indeed composed between November 1932 and March 1933, at a time when Howard was in dire need of money. (Incidentally, the fact that most Conan pastiches found their "inspiration" in such stories, and not Red Nails or Queen of the Black Coast, is a testimony to the critical eye of their authors.) Most of these stories have

something genuinely Howardian in them – as Lovecraft once wrote, Howard "was greater than any money-making policy he could adopt" – but they are clearly exploiting a formula calculated to win the cover illustration.

With the tales of Conan of Cimmeria, Howard was out for more than pulpish fare. While he 14

could have turned out story after story of the adventures of a Cimmerian killing monsters and lusting after scantily-clad damsels in distress, assuring himself a regular income, Howard decided not to turn his Cimmerian into an industry. The mark of the true author, he didn't hesitate to experiment with new types of stories, to take risks at a time when their sale and commercial success would have been assured otherwise. If the true work of art is something that at once attracts and disturbs, then the Conan stories are something special, an epic painted in bright colors, featuring heroic deeds and larger-than-life characters in fabled lands, but with something darker lying beneath.

Scratch the veneer at your own risk.

Patrice Louinet

2002

Cimmeria

Written in Mission, Texas, February, 1932; suggested by the memory of the hill-country above Fredericksburg seen in a mist of winter rain.

Robert E. Howard

Cimmeria

I remember

The dark woods, masking slopes of sombre hills;

The grey clouds' leaden everlasting arch;

The dusky streams that flowed without a sound,

And the lone winds that whispered down the passes.

Vista on vista marching, hills on hills,

Slope beyond slope, each dark with sullen trees,

Our gaunt land lay. So when a man climbed up

A rugged peak and gazed, his shaded eye

Saw but the endless vista – hill on hill,

Slope beyond slope, each hooded like its brothers.

It was a gloomy land that seemed to hold

All winds and clouds and dreams that shun the sun,

With bare boughs rattling in the lonesome winds,

And the dark woodlands brooding over all,

Not even lightened by the rare dim sun

Which made squat shadows out of men; they called it

Cimmeria, land of Darkness and deep Night.

It was so long ago and far away

I have forgot the very name men called me.

The axe and flint-tipped spear are like a dream,

And hunts and wars are shadows. I recall

Only the stillness of that sombre land;

The clouds that piled forever on the hills,

The dimness of the everlasting woods.

Cimmeria, land of Darkness and the Night.

Oh, soul of mine, born out of shadowed hills,

To clouds and winds and ghosts that shun the sun,

How many deaths shall serve to break at last

This heritage which wraps me in the grey

Apparel of ghosts? I search my heart and find

Cimmeria, land of Darkness and the Night.

17

The Coming of Conan The Cimmerian

The Phoenix on the Sword

The Phoenix on the Sword

“Know, oh prince, that between the years when the oceans drank Atlantis and the gleaming cities, and the years of the rise of the Sons of Aryas, there was an Age undreamed of, when shining kingdoms lay spread across the world like blue mantles beneath the stars – Nemedia, Ophir, Brythunia, Hyperborea, Zamora with its dark-haired women and towers of spider-haunted mystery, Zingara with its chivalry, Koth that bordered on the pastoral lands of Shem, Stygia with its shadow-guarded tombs, Hyrkania whose riders wore steel and silk and gold.

But the proudest kingdom of the world was Aquilonia, reigning supreme in the dreaming west.

Hither came Conan, the Cimmerian, black-haired, sullen-eyed, sword in hand, a thief, a reaver, a slayer, with gigantic melancholies and gigantic mirth, to tread the jeweled thrones of the Earth under his sandalled feet.”

– The Nemedian Chronicles.

Over shadowy spires and gleaming towers lay the ghostly darkness and silence that runs before dawn. Into a dim alley, one of a veritable labyrinth of

mysterious winding ways, four masked figures came hurriedly from a door which a dusky hand furtively opened. They spoke not but went swiftly into the gloom, cloaks wrapped closely about them; as silently as the ghosts of murdered men they disappeared in the darkness. Behind them a sardonic countenance was framed in the partly opened door; a pair of evil eyes glittered malevolently in the gloom.

“Go into the night, creatures of the night,” a voice mocked. “Oh, fools, your doom hounds your heels like a blind dog, and you know it not.”

The speaker closed the door and bolted it, then turned and went up the corridor, candle in hand.

He was a somber giant, whose dusky skin revealed his Stygian blood. He came into an inner chamber, where a tall, lean man in worn velvet lounged like a great lazy cat on a silken couch, sipping wine from a huge golden goblet.

“Well, Ascalante,” said the Stygian, setting down the candle, “your dupes have slunk into the streets like rats from their burrows. You work with strange tools.”

“Tools?” replied Ascalante. “Why, they consider *me* that. For months now, ever since the Rebel Four summoned me from the southern desert, I have been living in the very heart of my 18

enemies, hiding by day in this obscure house, skulking through dark alleys and darker corridors at night. And I have accomplished what those rebellious nobles could not. Working through them, and through other agents, many of whom have never seen my face, I have honeycombed the empire with sedition and unrest. In short I, working in the shadows, have paved the downfall of the king who sits throned in the sun. By Mitra, I was a statesman before I was an outlaw.”

“And these dupes who deem themselves your masters?”

“They will continue to think that I serve them, until our present task is completed. Who are they to match wits with Ascalante? Volmana, the dwarfish count of Karaban; Gromel, the giant commander of the Black Legion; Dion, the fat baron of Attalus; Rinaldo, the hare-brained minstrel. I am the force which has welded together the steel in each, and by the clay in

each, I will crush them when the time comes. But that lies in the future; tonight the king dies."

"Days ago I saw the imperial squadrons ride from the city," said the Stygian.

"They rode to the frontier which the heathen Picts assail – thanks to the strong liquor which I've smuggled over the borders to madden them. Dion's great wealth made *that* possible. And Volmana made it possible to dispose of the rest of the imperial troops which remained in the city. Through his princely kin in Nemedia, it was easy to persuade King Numa to request the presence of Count Trocero of Poitain, seneschal of Aquilonia; and of course, to do him honor, he'll be accompanied by an imperial escort, as well as his own troops, and Prospero, King Conan's right-hand man. That leaves only the king's personal bodyguard in the city—besides the Black Legion. Through Gromel I've corrupted a spendthrift officer of that guard, and bribed him to lead his men away from the king's door at midnight.

"Then, with sixteen desperate rogues of mine, we enter the palace by a secret tunnel. After the deed is done, even if the people do not rise to welcome us, Gromel's Black Legion will be sufficient to hold the city and the crown."

"And Dion thinks that crown will be given to him?"

"Yes. The fat fool claims it by reason of a trace of royal blood. Conan makes a bad mistake in letting men live who still boast descent from the old dynasty, from which he tore the crown of Aquilonia.

"Volmana wishes to be reinstated in royal favor as he was under the old regime, so that he may lift his poverty-ridden estates to their former grandeur. Gromel hates Pallantides, commander of the Black Dragons, and desires the command of the whole army, with all the stubbornness of the Bossonian. Alone of us all, Rinaldo has no personal ambition. He sees in Conan a red19

handed, rough-footed barbarian who came out of the north to plunder a civilized land. He idealizes the king whom Conan killed to get the crown, remembering only that he occasionally patronized the arts, and forgetting the evils of his reign, and he is making the people forget.

Already they openly sing *The Lament for the King* in which Rinaldo lauds the sainted villain and denounces Conan as 'that black-hearted savage from the abyss.' Conan laughs, but the people snarl."

“Why does he hate Conan?”

“Poets always hate those in power. To them perfection is always just behind the last corner, or beyond the next. They escape the present in dreams of the past and future. Rinaldo is a flaming torch of idealism, rising, as he thinks, to overthrow a tyrant and liberate the people. As for me –

well, a few months ago I had lost all ambition but to raid the caravans for the rest of my life; now old dreams stir. Conan will die; Dion will mount the throne. Then he, too, will die. One by one, all who oppose me will die – by fire, or steel, or those deadly wines you know so well how to brew. Ascalante, king of Aquilonia! How like you the sound of it?”

The Stygian shrugged his broad shoulders.

“There was a time,” he said with unconcealed bitterness, “when I, too, had my ambitions, beside which yours seem tawdry and childish. To what a state I have fallen! My old-time peers and rivals would stare indeed could they see Thoth-amon of the Ring serving as the slave of an outlander, and an outlaw at that; and aiding in the petty ambitions of barons and kings!”

“You laid your trust in magic and mummery,” answered Ascalante carelessly. “I trust my wits and my sword.”

“Wits and swords are as straws against the wisdom of the Darkness,” growled the Stygian, his dark eyes flickering with menacing lights and shadows. “Had I not lost the Ring, our positions might be reversed.”

“Nevertheless,” answered the outlaw impatiently, “you wear the stripes of my whip on your back, and are likely to continue to wear them.”

“Be not so sure!” the fiendish hatred of the Stygian glittered for an instant redly in his eyes.

“Some day, somehow, I will find the Ring again, and when I do, by the serpent-fangs of Set, you shall pay –”

The hot-tempered Aquilonian started up and struck him heavily across the mouth. Thoth reeled 20

back, blood starting from his lips.

“You grow over-bold, dog,” growled the outlaw. “Have a care; I am still your master who knows your dark secret. Go upon the housetops and shout that Ascalante is in the city plotting against the king – if you dare.”

“I dare not,” muttered the Stygian, wiping the blood from his lips.

“No, you do not dare,” Ascalante grinned bleakly. “For if I die by your stealth or treachery, a hermit priest in the southern desert will know of it, and will break the seal of a manuscript I left in his hands. And having read, a word will be whispered in Stygia, and a wind will creep up from the south by midnight. And where will you hide your head, Thoth-amon?”

The slave shuddered and his dusky face went ashen.

“Enough!” Ascalante changed his tone peremptorily. “I have work for you. I do not trust Dion.

I bade him ride to his country estate and remain there until the work tonight is done. The fat fool could never conceal his nervousness before the king today. Ride after him, and if you do not overtake him on the road, proceed to his estate and remain with him until we send for him.

Don’t let him out of your sight. He is mazed with fear, and might bolt – might even rush to Conan in a panic, and reveal the whole plot, hoping thus to save his own hide. Go!”

The slave bowed, hiding the hate in his eyes, and did as he was bidden. Ascalante turned again to his wine. Over the jeweled spires was rising a dawn crimson as blood.

II

When I was a fighting-man, the kettle-drums they beat,

The people scattered gold-dust before my horse’s feet;

But now I am a great king, the people hound my track

With poison in my wine-cup, and daggers at my back.

– *The Road of Kings.*

The room was large and ornate, with rich tapestries on the polished-panelled walls, deep rugs on the ivory floor, and with the lofty ceiling adorned with

intricate carvings and silver scrollwork. Behind an ivory, gold-inlaid writing-table sat a man whose broad shoulders and 21

sun-browned skin seemed out of place among those luxuriant surroundings. He seemed more a part of the sun and winds and high places of the outlands. His slightest movement spoke of steel-spring muscles knit to a keen brain with the co-ordination of a born fighting-man. There was nothing deliberate or measured about his actions. Either he was perfectly at rest – still as a bronze statue – or else he was in motion, not with the jerky quickness of over-tense nerves, but with a cat-like speed that blurred the sight which tried to follow him.

His garments were of rich fabric, but simply made. He wore no ring or ornaments, and his square-cut black mane was confined merely by a cloth-of-silver band about his head.

Now he laid down the golden stylus with which he had been laboriously scrawling on waxed papyrus, rested his chin on his fist, and fixed his smoldering blue eyes enviously on the man who stood before him. This person was occupied in his own affairs at the moment, for he was taking up the laces of his gold-chased armor, and abstractedly whistling – a rather unconventional performance, considering that he was in the presence of a king.

“Prospero,” said the man at the table, “these matters of statecraft weary me as all the fighting I have done never did.”

“All part of the game, Conan,” answered the dark-eyed Poitainian. “You are king – you must play the part.”

“I wish I might ride with you to Nemedia,” said Conan enviously. “It seems ages since I had a horse between my knees – but Publius says that affairs in the city require my presence. Curse him!

“When I overthrew the old dynasty,” he continued, speaking with the easy familiarity which existed only between the Poitainian and himself, “it was easy enough, though it seemed bitter hard at the time. Looking back now over the wild path I followed, all those days of toil, intrigue, slaughter and tribulation seem like a dream.

“I did not dream far enough, Prospero. When King Numedides lay dead at my

feet and I tore the crown from his gory head and set it on my own, I had reached the ultimate border of my dreams. I had prepared myself to take the crown, not to hold it. In the old free days all I wanted was a sharp sword and a straight path to my enemies. Now no paths are straight and my sword is useless.

“When I overthrew Numedides, *then* I was the Liberator – now they spit at my shadow. They have put a statue of that swine in the temple of Mitra, and people go and wail before it, hailing it as the holy effigy of a saintly monarch who was done to death by a red-handed barbarian.

When I led her armies to victory as a mercenary, Aquilonia overlooked the fact that I was a 22

foreigner, but now she can not forgive me.

“Now in Mitra’s temple there come to burn incense to Numedides’ memory, men whom his hangmen maimed and blinded, men whose sons died in his dungeons, whose wives and daughters were dragged into his seraglio. The fickle fools!”

“Rinaldo is largely responsible,” answered Prospero, drawing up his sword-belt another notch.

“He sings songs that make men mad. Hang him in his jester’s garb to the highest tower in the city. Let him make rimes for the vultures.”

Conan shook his lion head. “No, Prospero, he’s beyond my reach. A great poet is greater than any king. His songs are mightier than my scepter; for he has near ripped the heart from my breast when he chose to sing for me. I shall die and be forgotten, but Rinaldo’s songs will live for ever.

“No, Prospero,” the king continued, a somber look of doubt shadowing his eyes, “there is something hidden, some undercurrent of which we are not aware. I sense it as in my youth I sensed the tiger hidden in the tall grass. There is a nameless unrest throughout the kingdom. I am like a hunter who crouches by his small fire amid the forest, and hears stealthy feet padding in the darkness, and almost sees the glimmer of burning eyes. If I could but come to grips with something tangible, that I could cleave with my sword! I tell you, it’s not by chance that the Picts have of late so fiercely assailed the frontiers, so that the Bossonians have called for aid to beat them back. I

should have ridden with the troops.”

“Publius feared a plot to trap and slay you beyond the frontier,” replied Prospero, smoothing his silken surcoat over his shining mail, and admiring his tall lithe figure in a silver mirror.

“That’s why he urged you to remain in the city. These doubts are born of your barbarian instincts. Let the people snarl! The mercenaries are ours, and the Black Dragons, and every rogue in Poitain swears by you. Your only danger is assassination, and that’s impossible, with men of the imperial troops guarding you day and night. What are you working at there?”

“A map,” Conan answered with pride. “The maps of the court show well the countries of south, east and west, but in the north they are vague and faulty. I am adding the northern lands myself.

Here is Cimmeria, where I was born. And –”

“Asgard and Vanaheim,” Prospero scanned the map. “By Mitra, I had almost believed those countries to have been fabulous.”

Conan grinned savagely, involuntarily touching the scars on his dark face. “You had known otherwise, had you spent your youth on the northern frontiers of Cimmeria! Asgard lies to the north, and Vanaheim to the northwest of Cimmeria, and there is continual war along the 23

borders.”

“What manner of men are these northern folk?” asked Prospero.

“Tall and fair and blue-eyed. Their god is Ymir, the frost-giant, and each tribe has its own king.

They are wayward and fierce. They fight all day and drink ale and roar their wild songs all night.”

“Then I think you are like them,” laughed Prospero. “You laugh greatly, drink deep and bellow good songs; though I never saw another Cimmerian who drank aught but water, or who ever laughed, or ever sang save to chant dismal dirges.”

“Perhaps it’s the land they live in,” answered the king. “A gloomier land never was – all of hills, darkly wooded, under skies nearly always gray, with winds moaning drearily down the valleys.”

“Little wonder men grow moody there,” quoth Prospero with a shrug of his shoulders, thinking of the smiling sun-washed plains and blue lazy rivers of Poitain, Aquilonia’s southernmost province.

“They have no hope here or hereafter,” answered Conan. “Their gods are Crom and his dark race, who rule over a sunless place of everlasting mist, which is the world of the dead. Mitra!

The ways of the *Æ*sir were more to my liking.”

“Well,” grinned Prospero, “the dark hills of Cimmeria are far behind you. And now I go. I’ll quaff a goblet of white Nemedian wine for you at Numa’s court.”

“Good,” grunted the king, “but kiss Numa’s dancing-girls for yourself only, lest you involve the states!”

His gusty laughter followed Prospero out of the chamber.

III

Under the caverned pyramids great Set coils asleep;

Among the shadows of the tombs his dusky people creep.

I speak the Word from the hidden gulfs that never knew the sun –

Send me a servant for my hate, oh scaled and shining One!

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The Coming of Conan The Cimmerian

The sun was setting, etching the green and hazy blue of the forest in brief gold. The waning beams glinted on the thick golden chain which Dion of Attalus twisted continually in his pudgy hand as he sat in the flaming riot of blossoms and flower-trees which was his garden. He shifted his fat body on his marble seat and glanced furtively about, as if in quest of a lurking enemy. He sat within a circular grove of slender trees, whose interlapping branches cast a thick shade over him. Near at hand a fountain tinkled silverly, and other

unseen fountains in various parts of the great garden whispered an everlasting symphony.

Dion was alone except for the great dusky figure which lounged on a marble bench close at hand, watching the baron with deep somber eyes. Dion gave little thought to Thoth-amon. He vaguely knew that he was a slave in whom Ascalante reposed much trust, but like so many rich men, Dion paid scant heed to men below his own station in life.

“You need not be so nervous,” said Thoth. “The plot can not fail.”

“Ascalante can make mistakes as well as another,” snapped Dion, sweating at the mere thought of failure.

“Not he,” grinned the Stygian savagely, “else I had not been his slave, but his master.”

“What talk is this?” peevishly returned Dion, with only half a mind on the conversation.

Thoth-amon’s eyes narrowed. For all his iron-self-control, he was near bursting with long pent-up shame, hate and rage, ready to take any sort of a desperate chance. What he did not reckon on was the fact that Dion saw him, not as a human being with a brain and a wit, but simply a slave, and as such, a creature beneath notice.

“Listen to me,” said Thoth. “You will be king. But you little know the mind of Ascalante. You can not trust him, once Conan is slain. I can help you. If you will protect me when you come to power, I will aid you.

“Listen, my lord. I was a great sorcerer in the south. Men spoke of Thoth-amon as they spoke of Rammon. King Ctesphon of Stygia gave me great honor, casting down the magicians from the high places to exalt me above them. They hated me, but they feared me, for I controlled beings from *outside* which came at my call and did my bidding. By Set, mine enemy knew not the hour when he might awake at midnight to feel the taloned fingers of a nameless horror at his throat! I did dark and terrible magic with the Serpent Ring of Set, which I found in a nighted tomb a league beneath the earth, forgotten before the first man crawled out of the slimy sea.

“But a thief stole the Ring and my power was broken. The magicians rose up to slay me, and I fled. Disguised as a camel-driver, I was travelling in a caravan in the land of Koth, when Ascalante’s reavers fell upon us. All in the caravan were slain except myself; I saved my life by revealing my identity to Ascalante and swearing to serve him. Bitter has been that bondage!

“To hold me fast, he wrote of me in a manuscript, and sealed it and gave it into the hands of a hermit who dwells on the southern borders of Koth. I dare not strike a dagger into him while he sleeps, or betray him to his enemies, for then the hermit would open the manuscript and read –

thus Ascalante instructed him. And he would speak a word in Stygia –”

Again Thoth shuddered and an ashen hue tinged his dusky skin.

“Men knew me not in Aquilonia,” he said. “But should my enemies in Stygia learn my whereabouts, not the width of half a world between us would suffice to save me from such a doom as would blast the soul of a bronze statue. Only a king with castles and hosts of swordsmen could protect me. So I have told you my secret, and urge that you make a pact with me. I can aid you with my wisdom, and you can protect me. And some day I will find the Ring

–”

“Ring? Ring?” Thoth had underestimated the man’s utter egoism. Dion had not even been listening to the slave’s words, so completely engrossed was he in his own thoughts, but the final word stirred a ripple in his self-centeredness.

“Ring?” he repeated. “That makes me remember – my ring of good fortune. I had it from a Shemitish thief who swore he stole it from a wizard far to the south, and that it would bring me luck. I paid him enough, Mitra knows. By the gods, I need all the luck I can have, what with Volmana and Ascalante dragging me into their bloody plots – I’ll see to the ring.”

Thoth sprang up, blood mounting darkly to his face, while his eyes flamed with the stunned fury of a man who suddenly realizes the full depths of a fool’s swinish stupidity. Dion never heeded him. Lifting a secret lid in the marble seat, he fumbled for a moment among a heap of gewgaws of various kinds – barbaric charms, bits of bones, pieces of tawdry jewelry – luck-pieces and conjures which the man’s superstitious nature had prompted him to collect.

“Ah, here it is!” He triumphantly lifted a ring of curious make. It was of a metal like copper, and was made in the form of a scaled serpent, coiled in three loops, with its tail in its mouth. Its eyes were yellow gems which glittered balefully. Thoth-amon cried out as if he had been struck, and Dion wheeled and gaped, his face suddenly bloodless. The slave’s eyes were blazing, his mouth wide, his huge dusky hands outstretched like talons.

“The Ring! By Set! The Ring!” he shrieked. “My Ring – stolen from me –”

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Steel glittered in the Stygian’s hand and with a heave of his great dusky shoulders he drove the dagger into the baron’s fat body. Dion’s high thin squeal broke in a strangled gurgle and his whole flabby frame collapsed like melted butter. A fool to the end, he died in mad terror, not knowing why. Flinging aside the crumpled corpse, already forgetful of it, Thoth grasped the ring in both hands, his dark eyes blazing with a fearful avidness.

“My Ring!” he whispered in terrible exultation. “My power!”

How long he crouched over the baleful thing, motionless as a statue, drinking the evil aura of it into his dark soul, not even the Stygian knew. When he shook himself from his revery and drew back his mind from the nighted abysses where it had been questing, the moon was rising, casting long shadows across the smooth marble back of the garden-seat, at the foot of which sprawled the darker shadow which had been the lord of Attalus.

“No more, Ascalante, no more!” whispered the Stygian, and his eyes burned red as a vampire’s in the gloom. Stooping, he cupped a handful of congealing blood from the sluggish pool in which his victim sprawled, and rubbed it in the copper serpent’s eyes until the yellow sparks were covered by a crimson mask.

“Blind your eyes, mystic serpent,” he chanted in a blood-freezing whisper. “Blind your eyes to the moonlight and open them on darker gulfs! What do you see, oh serpent of Set? Whom do you call from the gulfs of the Night? Whose shadow falls on the waning Light? Call him to me, oh serpent of Set!”

Stroking the scales with a peculiar circular motion of his fingers, a motion which always carried the fingers back to their starting place, his voice sank still lower as he whispered dark names and grisly incantations forgotten the

world over save in the grim hinterlands of dark Stygia, where monstrous shapes move in the dusk of the tombs.

There was a movement in the air about him, such a swirl as is made in water when some creature rises to the surface. A nameless, freezing wind blew on him briefly, as if from an opened Door. Thoth felt a presence at his back, but he did not look about. He kept his eyes fixed on the moonlit space of marble, on which a tenuous shadow hovered. As he continued his whispered incantations, this shadow grew in size and clarity, until it stood out distinct and horrific. Its outline was not unlike that of a gigantic baboon, but no such baboon ever walked the earth, not even in Stygia. Still Thoth did not look, but drawing from his girdle a sandal of his master – always carried in the dim hope that he might be able to put it to such use – he cast it behind him.

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“Know it well, slave of the Ring!” he exclaimed. “Find him who wore it and destroy him! Look into his eyes and blast his soul, before you tear out his throat! Kill him! Aye,” in a blind burst of passion, “and all with him!”

Etched on the moonlit wall Thoth saw the horror lower its misshapen head and take the scent like some hideous hound. Then the grisly head was thrown back and the thing wheeled and was gone like a wind through the trees. The Stygian flung up his arms in maddened exultation, and his teeth and eyes gleamed in the moonlight.

A soldier on guard without the walls yelled in startled horror as a great loping black shadow with flaming eyes cleared the wall and swept by him with a swirling rush of wind. But it was gone so swiftly that the bewildered warrior was left wondering whether it had been a dream or a hallucination.

IV

When the world was young and men were weak, and the fiends of the night walked free, I strove with Set by fire and steel and the juice of the upas-tree; Now that I sleep in the mount’s black heart, and the ages take their toll, Forget ye him who fought with the Snake to save the human soul?

Alone in the great sleeping-chamber with its high golden dome King Conan slumbered and dreamed. Through swirling gray mists he heard a curious call, faint and far, and though he did not understand it, it seemed not within his

power to ignore it. Sword in hand he went through the gray mist, as a man might walk through clouds, and the voice grew more distinct as he proceeded until he understood the word it spoke – it was his own name that was being called across the gulfs of Space or Time.

Now the mists grew lighter and he saw that he was in a great dark corridor that seemed to be cut in solid black stone. It was unlighted, but by some magic he could see plainly. The floor, ceiling and walls were highly polished and gleamed dully, and they were carved with the figures of ancient heroes and half-forgotten gods. He shuddered to see the vast shadowy outlines of the Nameless Old Ones, and he knew somehow that mortal feet had not traversed the corridor for centuries.

He came upon a wide stair carved in the solid rock, and the sides of the shaft were adorned with esoteric symbols so ancient and horrific that King Conan's skin crawled. The steps were 28

carven each with the abhorrent figure of the Old Serpent, Set, so that at each step he planted his heel on the head of the Snake, as it was intended from old times. But he was none the less at ease for all that.

But the voice called him on, and at last, in darkness that would have been impenetrable to his material eyes, he came into a strange crypt, and saw a vague white-bearded figure sitting on a tomb. Conan's hair rose up and he grasped his sword, but the figure spoke in sepulchral tones.

"Oh man, do you know me?"

"Not I, by Crom!" swore the king.

"Man," said the ancient, "I am Epemitreus."

"But Epemitreus the Sage has been dead for fifteen hundred years!" stammered Conan.

"Harken!" spoke the other commandingly. "As a pebble cast into a dark lake sends ripples to the further shores, happenings in the Unseen World have broken like waves on my slumber. I have marked you well, Conan of Cimmeria, and the stamp of mighty happenings and great deeds is upon you. But dooms are loose in the land, against which your sword can not aid you."

“You speak in riddles,” said Conan uneasily. “Let me see my foe and I’ll cleave his skull to the teeth.”

“Loose your barbarian fury against your foes of flesh and blood,” answered the ancient. “It is not against men I must shield you. There are dark worlds barely guessed by man, wherein formless monsters stalk – fiends which may be drawn from the Outer Voids to take material shape and rend and devour at the bidding of evil magicians. There is a serpent in your house, oh king – an adder in your kingdom, come up from Stygia, with the dark wisdom of the shadows in his murky soul. As a sleeping man dreams of the serpent which crawls near him, I have felt the foul presence of Set’s neophyte. He is drunk with terrible power, and the blows he strikes at his enemy may well bring down the kingdom. I have called you to me, to give you a weapon against him and his hell-hound pack.”

“But why?” bewilderedly asked Conan. “Men say you sleep in the black heart of Golamira, whence you send forth your ghost on unseen wings to aid Aquilonia in times of need, but I – I am an outlander and a barbarian.”

“Peace!” the ghostly tones reverberated through the great shadowy cavern. “Your destiny is one with Aquilonia. Gigantic happenings are forming in the web and the womb of Fate, and a blood-mad sorcerer shall not stand in the path of imperial destiny. Ages ago Set coiled about 29

the world like a python about its prey. All my life, which was as the lives of three common men, I fought him. I drove him into the shadows of the mysterious south, but in dark Stygia men still worship him who to us is the arch-demon. As I fought Set, I fight his worshippers and his votaries and his acolytes. Hold out your sword.”

Wondering, Conan did so, and on the great blade, close to the heavy silver guard, the ancient traced with a bony finger a strange symbol that glowed like white fire in the shadows. And on the instant crypt, tomb and ancient vanished, and Conan, bewildered, sprang from his couch in the great golden-domed chamber. And as he stood, bewildered at the strangeness of his dream, he realized that he was gripping his sword in his hand. And his hair prickled at the nape of his neck, for on the broad blade was carven a symbol – the outline of a phœnix. And he remembered that on the tomb in the crypt he had seen what he had thought to be a similar figure, carven of stone. Now he wondered if it had been but a stone figure, and his skin crawled at the strangeness of it all.

Then as he stood, a stealthy sound in the corridor outside brought him to life, and without stopping to investigate, he began to don his armor; again he was the barbarian, suspicious and alert as a gray wolf at bay.

V

What do I know of cultured ways, the gilt, the craft and the lie?

I, who was born in a naked land and bred in the open sky.

The subtle tongue, the sophist guile, they fail when the broadswords sing;
Rush in and die, dogs—I was a man before I was a king.

– *The Road of Kings.*

Through the silence which shrouded the corridor of the royal palace stole twenty furtive figures. Their stealthy feet, bare or cased in soft leather, made no sound either on thick carpet or bare marble tile. The torches which stood in niches along the halls gleamed red on dagger, sword and keen-edged ax.

“Easy all!” hissed Ascalante. “Stop that cursed loud breathing, whoever it is! The officer of the night-guard has removed most of the sentries from these halls and made the rest drunk, but we must be careful, just the same. Back! Here come the guard!”

They crowded back behind a cluster of carven pillars, and almost immediately ten giants in black armor swung by at a measured pace. Their faces showed doubt as they glanced at the officer who was leading them away from their post of duty. This officer was rather pale; as the guard passed the hiding-places of the conspirators, he was seen to wipe the sweat from his brow with a shaky hand. He was young, and this betrayal of a king did not come easy to him.

He mentally cursed the vain-glorious extravagance which had put him in debt to the moneylenders and made him a pawn of scheming politicians.

The guardsmen clanked by and disappeared up the corridor.

“Good!” grinned Ascalante. “Conan sleeps unguarded. Haste! If they catch us

killing him, we're undone – but few men will espouse the cause of a dead king."

"Aye, haste!" cried Rinaldo, his blue eyes matching the gleam of the sword he swung above his head. "My blade is thirsty! I hear the gathering of the vultures! On!"

They hurried down the corridor with reckless speed and stopped before a gilded door which bore the royal dragon symbol of Aquilonia.

"Gromel!" snapped Ascalante. "Break me this door open!"

The giant drew a deep breath and launched his mighty frame against the panels, which groaned and bent at the impact. Again he crouched and plunged. With a snapping of bolts and a rending crash of wood, the door splintered and burst inward.

"In!" roared Ascalante, on fire with the spirit of the deed.

"In!" yelled Rinaldo. "Death to the tyrant!"

They stopped short. Conan faced them, not a naked man roused mazed and unarmed out of deep sleep to be butchered like a sheep, but a barbarian wide-awake and at bay, partly armored, and with his long sword in his hand.

For an instant the tableau held – the four rebel noblemen in the broken door, and the horde of wild hairy faces crowding behind them – all held momentarily frozen by the sight of the blazing-eyed giant standing sword in hand in the middle of the candle-lighted chamber. In that instant Ascalante beheld, on a small table near the royal couch, the silver scepter and the slender gold circlet which was the crown of Aquilonia, and the sight maddened him with desire.

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"In, rogues!" yelled the outlaw. "He is one to twenty and he has no helmet!"

True; there had been lack of time to don the heavy plumed casque, or to lace in place the side-plates of the cuirass, nor was there now time to snatch the great shield from the wall. Still, Conan was better protected than any of his foes except Volmana and Gromel, who were in full armor.

The king glared, puzzled as to their identity. Ascalante he did not know; he could not see through the closed vizors of the armored conspirators, and Rinaldo had pulled his slouch cap down above his eyes. But there was no time for surmise. With a yell that rang to the roof, the killers flooded into the room, Gromel first. He came like a charging bull, head down, sword low for the disembowelling thrust. Conan sprang to meet him, and all his tigerish strength went into the arm that swung the sword. In a whistling arc the great blade flashed through the air and crashed on the Bossonian's helmet. Blade and casque shivered together and Gromel rolled lifeless on the floor. Conan bounded back, still gripping the broken hilt.

"Gromel!" he spat, his eyes blazing in amazement, as the shattered helmet disclosed the shattered head; then the rest of the pack were upon him. A dagger point raked along his ribs between breastplate and backplate, a sword-edge flashed before his eyes. He flung aside the dagger-wielder with his left arm, and smashed his broken hilt like a cestus into the swordsman's temple. The man's brains spattered in his face.

"Watch the door, five of you!" screamed Ascalante, dancing about the edge of the singing steel whirlpool, for he feared that Conan might smash through their midst and escape. The rogues drew back momentarily, as their leader seized several and thrust them toward the single door, and in that brief respite Conan leaped to the wall and tore therefrom an ancient battle-ax which, untouched by time, had hung there for half a century.

With his back to the wall he faced the closing ring for a flashing instant, then leaped into the thick of them. He was no defensive fighter; even in the teeth of overwhelming odds he always carried the war to the enemy. Any other man would have already died there, and Conan himself did not hope to survive, but he did ferociously wish to inflict as much damage as he could before he fell. His barbaric soul was ablaze, and the chants of old heroes were singing in his ears.

As he sprang from the wall his ax dropped an outlaw with a severed shoulder, and the terrible back-hand return crushed the skull of another. Swords whined venomously about him, but death passed him by breathless margins. The Cimmerian moved in a blur of blinding speed. He was like a tiger among baboons as he leaped, side-stepped and spun, offering an ever-moving target, while his ax wove a shining wheel of death about him.

For a brief space the assassins crowded him fiercely, raining blows blindly and hampered by their own numbers; then they gave back suddenly – two corpses on the floor gave mute evidence of the king's fury, though Conan himself was bleeding from wounds on arm, neck and legs.

"Knaves!" screamed Rinaldo, dashing off his feathered cap, his wild eyes glaring. "Do ye shrink from the combat? Shall the despot live? Out on it!"

He rushed in, hacking madly, but Conan, recognizing him, shattered his sword with a short terrific chop and with a powerful push of his open hand sent him reeling to the floor. The king took Ascalante's point in his left arm, and the outlaw barely saved his life by ducking and springing backward from the swinging ax. Again the wolves swirled in and Conan's ax sang and crushed. A hairy rascal stooped beneath its stroke and dived at the king's legs, but after wrestling for a brief instant at what seemed a solid iron tower, glanced up in time to see the ax falling, but not in time to avoid it. In the interim one of his comrades lifted a broadsword with both hands and hewed through the king's left shoulder-plate, wounding the shoulder beneath.

In an instant Conan's cuirass was full of blood.

Volmana, flinging the attackers right and left in his savage impatience, came plowing through and hacked murderously at Conan's unprotected head. The king ducked deeply and the sword shaved off a lock of his black hair as it whistled above him. Conan pivoted on his heel and struck in from the side. The ax crunched through the steel cuirass and Volmana crumpled with his whole left side caved in.

"Volmana!" gasped Conan breathlessly. "I'll know that dwarf in Hell –"

He straightened to meet the maddened rush of Rinaldo, who charged in wild and wide open, armed only with a dagger. Conan leaped back, lifting his ax.

"Rinaldo!" his voice was strident with desperate urgency. "Back! I would not slay you –"

"Die, tyrant!" screamed the mad minstrel, hurling himself headlong on the king. Conan delayed the blow he was loth to deliver, until it was too late. Only when he felt the bite of the steel in his unprotected side did he strike, in a frenzy of blind desperation.

Rinaldo dropped with his skull shattered, and Conan reeled back against the

wall, blood spurting from between the fingers which gripped his wound.

“In, now, and slay him!” yelled Ascalante.

Conan put his back against the wall and lifted his ax. He stood like an image of the 33

unconquerable primordial – legs braced far apart, head thrust forward, one hand clutching the wall for support, the other gripping the ax on high, with the great corded muscles standing out in iron ridges, and his features frozen in a death snarl of fury – his eyes blazing terribly through the mist of blood which veiled them. The men faltered – wild, criminal and dissolute though they were, yet they came of a breed men called civilized, with a civilized background; here was the barbarian – the natural killer. They shrank back – the dying tiger could still deal death.

Conan sensed their uncertainty and grinned mirthlessly and ferociously.

“Who dies first?” he mumbled through smashed and bloody lips.

Ascalante leaped like a wolf, halted almost in midair with incredible quickness and fell prostrate to avoid the death which was hissing toward him. He frantically whirled his feet out of the way and rolled clear as Conan recovered from his missed blow and struck again. This time the ax sank inches deep into the polished floor close to Ascalante’s revolving legs.

Another misguided desperado chose this instant to charge, followed half-heartedly by his fellows. He intended killing Conan before the Cimmerian could wrench his ax from the floor, but his judgment was faulty. The red ax lurched up and crashed down and a crimson caricature of a man catapulted back against the legs of the attackers.

At that instant a fearful scream burst from the rogues at the door as a black misshapen shadow fell across the wall. All but Ascalante wheeled at that cry, and then, howling like dogs, they burst blindly through the door in a raving, blaspheming mob, and scattered through the corridors in screaming flight.

Ascalante did not look toward the door; he had eyes only for the wounded king. He supposed that the noise of the fray had at last roused the palace, and that the loyal guards were upon him, though even in that moment it seemed strange that his hardened rogues should scream so terribly in their flight.

Conan did not look toward the door because he was watching the outlaw with the burning eyes of a dying wolf. In this extremity Ascalante's cynical philosophy did not desert him.

"All seems to be lost, particularly honor," he murmured. "However, the king is dying on his feet – and –" Whatever other cogitation might have passed through his mind is not to be known; for, leaving the sentence uncompleted, he ran lightly at Conan just as the Cimmerian was perforce employing his ax-arm to wipe the blood from his blinded eyes.

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But even as he began his charge, there was a strange rushing in the air and a heavy weight struck terrifically between his shoulders. He was dashed headlong and great talons sank agonizingly in his flesh. Writhing desperately beneath his attacker, he twisted his head about and stared into the face of Nightmare and lunacy. Upon him crouched a great black thing which he knew was born in no sane or human world. Its slavering black fangs were near his throat and the glare of its yellow eyes shrivelled his limbs as a killing wind shrivels young corn.

The hideousness of its face transcended mere bestiality. It might have been the face of an ancient, evil mummy, quickened with demoniac life. In those abhorrent features the outlaw's dilated eyes seemed to see, like a shadow in the madness that enveloped him, a faint and terrible resemblance to the slave Thoth-amon. Then Ascalante's cynical and all-sufficient philosophy deserted him, and with a ghastly cry he gave up the ghost before those slavering fangs touched him.

Conan, shaking the blood-drops from his eyes, stared frozen. At first he thought it was a great black hound which stood above Ascalante's distorted body; then as his sight cleared he saw that it was neither a hound nor a baboon.

With a cry that was like an echo of Ascalante's death-shriek, he reeled away from the wall and met the leaping horror with a cast of his ax that had behind it all the desperate power of his electrified nerves. The flying weapon glanced singing from the slanting skull it should have crushed, and the king was hurled half-way across the chamber by the impact of the giant body.

The slavering jaws closed on the arm Conan flung up to guard his throat, but

the monster made no effort to secure a death-grip. Over his mangled arm it glared fiendishly into the king's eyes, in which there began to be mirrored a likeness of the horror which stared from the dead eyes of Ascalante. Conan felt his soul shrivel and begin to be drawn out of his body, to drown in the yellow wells of cosmic horror which glimmered spectrally in the formless chaos that was growing about him and engulfing all life and sanity. Those eyes grew and became gigantic, and in them the Cimmerian glimpsed the reality of all the abysmal and blasphemous horrors that lurk in the outer darkness of formless voids and nighted gulfs. He opened his bloody lips to shriek his hate and loathing, but only a dry rattle burst from his throat.

But the horror that paralyzed and destroyed Ascalante roused in the Cimmerian a frenzied fury akin to madness. With a volcanic wrench of his whole body he plunged backward, heedless of the agony of his torn arm, dragging the monster bodily with him. And his outflung hand struck something his dazed fighting-brain recognized as the hilt of his broken sword. Instinctively he gripped it and struck with all the power of nerve and thew, as a man stabs with a dagger. The broken blade sank deep and Conan's arm was released as the abhorrent mouth gaped as in agony. The king was hurled violently aside, and lifting himself on one hand he saw, as one mazed, the terrible convulsions of the monster from which thick blood was gushing through the 35

great wound his broken blade had torn. And as he watched, its struggles ceased and it lay jerking spasmodically, staring upward with its grisly dead eyes. Conan blinked and shook the blood from his own eyes; it seemed to him that the thing was melting and disintegrating into a slimy unstable mass.

Then a medley of voices reached his ears, and the room was thronged with the finally roused people of the court – knights, peers, ladies, men-at-arms, councillors – all babbling and shouting and getting in one another's way. The Black Dragons were on hand, wild with rage, swearing and ruffling, with their hands on their hilts and foreign oaths in their teeth. Of the young officer of the door-guard nothing was seen, nor was he found then or later, though earnestly sought after.

"Gromel! Volmana! Rinaldo!" exclaimed Publius, the high councillor, wringing his fat hands among the corpses. "Black treachery! Some one shall dance for this! Call the guard."

"The guard is here, you old fool!" cavalierly snapped Pallantides, commander

of the Black Dragons, forgetting Publius' rank in the stress of the moment. "Best stop your caterwauling and aid us to bind the king's wounds. He's like to bleed to death."

"Yes, yes!" cried Publius, who was a man of plans rather than action. "We must bind his wounds. Send for every leech of the court! Oh, my lord, what a black shame on the city! Are you entirely slain?"

"Wine!" gasped the king from the couch where they had laid him. They put a goblet to his bloody lips and he drank like a man half dead of thirst.

"Good!" he grunted, falling back. "Slaying is cursed dry work."

They had stanched the flow of blood, and the innate vitality of the barbarian was asserting itself.

"See first to the dagger-wound in my side," he bade the court physicians. "Rinaldo wrote me a deathly song there, and keen was the stylus."

"We should have hanged him long ago," gibbered Publius. "No good can come of poets – who is this?"

He nervously touched Ascalante's body with his sandalled toe.

"By Mitra!" ejaculated the commander. "It is Ascalante, once count of Thune! What devil's work brought *him* up from his desert haunts?"

"But why does he stare so?" whispered Publius, drawing away, his own eyes wide and a peculiar prickling among the short hairs at the back of his fat neck. The others fell silent as they gazed at the dead outlaw.

"Had you seen what he and I saw," growled the king, sitting up despite the protests of the leeches, "you had not wondered. Blast your own gaze by looking at –" He stopped short, his mouth gaping, his finger pointing fruitlessly. Where the monster had died, only the bare floor met his eyes.

"Crom!" he swore. "The thing's melted back into the foulness which bore it!"

"The king is delirious," whispered a noble. Conan heard and swore with barbaric oaths.

“By Badb, Morrigan, Macha and Nemain!” he concluded wrathfully. “I am sane! It was like a cross between a Stygian mummy and a baboon. It came through the door, and Ascalante’s rogues fled before it. It slew Ascalante, who was about to run me through. Then it came upon me and I slew it – how I know not, for my ax glanced from it as from a rock. But I think that the Sage Epemitreus had a hand in it –”

“Hark how he names Epemitreus, dead for fifteen hundred years!” they whispered to each other.

“By Ymir!” thundered the king. “This night I talked with Epemitreus! He called to me in my dreams, and I walked down a black stone corridor carved with old gods, to a stone stair on the steps of which were the outlines of Set, until I came to a crypt, and a tomb with a phœnix carved on it –”

“In Mitra’s name, lord king, be silent!” It was the high-priest of Mitra who cried out, and his countenance was ashen.

Conan threw up his head like a lion tossing back its mane, and his voice was thick with the growl of the angry lion.

“Am I a slave, to shut my mouth at your command?”

“Nay, nay, my lord!” The high-priest was trembling, but not through fear of the royal wrath. “I meant no offense.” He bent his head close to the king and spoke in a whisper that carried only to Conan’s ears.

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“My lord, this is a matter beyond human understanding. Only the inner circle of the priestcraft know of the black stone corridor carved in the black heart of Mount Golamira, by unknown hands, or of the phœnix-guarded tomb where Epemitreus was laid to rest fifteen hundred years ago. And since that time no living man has entered it, for his chosen priests, after placing the Sage in the crypt, blocked up the outer entrance of the corridor so that no man could find it, and today not even the high-priests know where it is. Only by word of mouth, handed down by the high-priests to the chosen few, and jealously guarded, does the inner circle of Mitra’s acolytes know of the resting-place of Epemitreus in the black heart of Golamira. It is one of the Mysteries, on which Mitra’s cult stands.”

“I can not say by what magic Epemitreus brought me to him,” answered Conan. “But I talked with him, and he made a mark on my sword. Why that mark made it deadly to demons, or what magic lay behind the mark, I know not; but though the blade broke on Gromel’s helmet, yet the fragment was long enough to kill the horror.”

“Let me see your sword,” whispered the high-priest from a throat gone suddenly dry.

Conan held out the broken weapon and the high-priest cried out and fell to his knees.

“Mitra guard us against the powers of darkness!” he gasped. “The king has indeed talked with Epemitreus this night! There on the sword – it is the secret sign none might make but him – the emblem of the immortal phœnix which broods for ever over his tomb! A candle, quick! Look again at the spot where the king said the goblin died!”

It lay in the shade of a broken screen. They threw the screen aside and bathed the floor in a flood of candle-light. And a shuddering silence fell over the people as they looked. Then some fell on their knees calling on Mitra, and some fled screaming from the chamber.

There on the floor where the monster had died, there lay, like a tangible shadow, a broad dark stain that could not be washed out; the thing had left its outline clearly etched in its blood, and that outline was of no being of a sane and normal world. Grim and horrific it brooded there, like the shadow cast by one of the apish gods that squat on the shadowy altars of dim temples in the dark land of Stygia.

The Frost-Giant’s Daughter

The clangor of the swords had died away, the shouting of the slaughter was hushed; silence lay on the red-stained snow. The bleak pale sun that glittered so blindingly from the ice-fields and the snow-covered plains struck sheens of silver from rent corselet and broken blade, where the dead lay as they had fallen. The nerveless hand yet gripped the broken hilt; helmeted heads back-

drawn in the death-throes, tilted red beards and golden beards grimly upward, as if in last invocation to Ymir the frost-giant, god of a warrior-race.

Across the red drifts and mail-clad forms, two figures glared at each other. In that utter desolation only they moved. The frosty sky was over them, the white illimitable plain around them, the dead men at their feet. Slowly through the corpses they came, as ghosts might come to a tryst through the shambles of a dead world. In the brooding silence they stood face to face.

Both were tall men, built like tigers. Their shields were gone, their corselets battered and dinted. Blood dried on their mail; their swords were stained red. Their horned helmets showed the marks of fierce strokes. One was beardless and black-maned. The locks and beard of the other were red as the blood on the sunlit snow.

“Man,” said he, “tell me your name, so that my brothers in Vanaheim may know who was the last of Wulfhere’s band to fall before the sword of Heimdul.”

“Not in Vanaheim,” growled the black-haired warrior, “but in Valhalla will you tell your brothers that you met Conan of Cimmeria.”

Heimdul roared and leaped, and his sword flashed in deathly arc. Conan staggered and his vision was filled with red sparks as the singing blade crashed on his helmet, shivering into bits of blue fire. But as he reeled he thrust with all the power of his broad shoulders behind the humming blade. The sharp point tore through brass scales and bones and heart, and the red-haired warrior died at Conan’s feet.

The Cimmerian stood upright, trailing his sword, a sudden sick weariness assailing him. The glare of the sun on the snow cut his eyes like a knife and the sky seemed shrunken and strangely apart. He turned away from the trampled expanse where yellow-bearded warriors lay locked with red-haired slayers in the embrace of death. A few steps he took, and the glare of the snow fields was suddenly dimmed. A rushing wave of blindness engulfed him and he sank 39

down into the snow, supporting himself on one mailed arm, seeking to shake the blindness out of his eyes as a lion might shake his mane.

A silvery laugh cut through his dizziness, and his sight cleared slowly. He

looked up; there was a strangeness about all the landscape that he could not place or define – an unfamiliar tinge to earth and sky. But he did not think long of this. Before him, swaying like a sapling in the wind, stood a woman. Her body was like ivory to his dazed gaze, and save for a light veil of gossamer, she was naked as the day. Her slender bare feet were whiter than the snow they spurned. She laughed down at the bewildered warrior. Her laughter was sweeter than the rippling of silvery fountains, and poisonous with cruel mockery.

“Who are you?” asked the Cimmerian. “Whence come you?”

“What matter?” Her voice was more musical than a silver-stringed harp, but it was edged with cruelty.

“Call up your men,” said he, grasping his sword. “Yet though my strength fail me, they shall not take me alive. I see that you are of the Vanir.”

“Have I said so?”

His gaze went again to her unruly locks, which at first glance he had thought to be red. Now he saw that they were neither red nor yellow but a glorious compound of both colors. He gazed spell-bound. Her hair was like elfin-gold; the sun struck it so dazzlingly that he could scarcely bear to look upon it. Her eyes were likewise neither wholly blue nor wholly grey, but of shifting colors and dancing lights and clouds of colors he could not define. Her full red lips smiled, and from her slender feet to the blinding crown of her billowy hair, her ivory body was as perfect as the dream of a god. Conan’s pulse hammered in his temples.

“I can not tell,” said he, “whether you are of Vanaheim and mine enemy, or of Asgard and my friend. Far have I wandered, but a woman like you I have never seen. Your locks blind me with their brightness. Never have I seen such hair, not even among the fairest daughters of the Æsir.

By Ymir –”

“Who are you to swear by Ymir?” she mocked. “What know you of the gods of ice and snow, you who have come up from the south to adventure among an alien people?”

“By the dark gods of my own race!” he cried in anger. “Though I am not of the golden haired Æsir, none has been more forward in sword-play! This day I have seen four score men fall, and I alone have survived the field where

Wulfhere’s reavers met the wolves of Bragi. Tell me, woman, have you seen the flash of mail out across the snow-plains, or seen armed men moving 40

upon the ice?”

“I have seen the hoar-frost glittering in the sun,” she answered. “I have heard the wind whispering across the everlasting snows.”

He shook his head with a sigh.

“Niord should have come up with us before the battle joined. I fear he and his fighting-men have been ambushed. Wulfhere and his warriors lie dead.

“I had thought there was no village within many leagues of this spot, for the war carried us far, but you can not have come a great distance over these snows, naked as you are. Lead me to your tribe, if you are of Asgard, for I am faint with blows and the weariness of strife.”

“My village is further than you can walk, Conan of Cimmeria,” she laughed. Spreading her arms wide, she swayed before him, her golden head lolling sensuously, her scintillant eyes half shadowed beneath their long silken lashes. “Am I not beautiful, oh man?”

“Like Dawn running naked on the snows,” he muttered, his eyes burning like those of a wolf.

“Then why do you not rise and follow me? Who is the strong warrior who falls down before me?” she chanted in maddening mockery. “Lie down and die in the snow with the other fools, Conan of the black hair. You can not follow where I would lead.”

With an oath the Cimmerian heaved himself up on his feet, his blue eyes blazing, his dark scarred face contorted. Rage shook his soul, but desire for the taunting figure before him hammered at his temples and drove his wild blood fiercely through his veins. Passion fierce as physical agony flooded his whole being, so that earth and sky swam red to his dizzy gaze. In the madness that swept upon him, weariness and faintness were swept away.

He spoke no word as he drove at her, fingers spread to grip her soft flesh. With a shriek of laughter she leaped back and ran, laughing at him over her white shoulder. With a low growl Conan followed. He had forgotten the fight,

forgotten the mailed warriors who lay in their blood, forgotten Niord and the reavers who had failed to reach the fight. He had thought only for the slender white shape which seemed to float rather than run before him.

Out across the white blinding plain the chase led. The trampled red field fell out of sight behind him, but still Conan kept on with the silent tenacity of his race. His mailed feet broke through the frozen crust; he sank deep in the drifts and forged through them by sheer strength. But the girl danced across the snow light as a feather floating across a pool; her naked feet barely left their imprint on the hoar-frost that overlaid the crust. In spite of the fire in his veins, the cold 41

bit through the warrior’s mail and fur-lined tunic; but the girl in her gossamer veil ran as lightly and as gaily as if she danced through the palm and rose gardens of Poitain.

On and on she led, and Conan followed. Black curses drooled through the Cimmerian’s parched lips. The great veins in his temples swelled and throbbed and his teeth gnashed.

“You can not escape me!” he roared. “Lead me into a trap and I’ll pile the heads of your kinsmen at your feet! Hide from me and I’ll tear apart the mountains to find you! I’ll follow you to hell!”

Her maddening laughter floated back to him, and foam flew from the barbarian’s lips. Further and further into the wastes she led him. The land changed; the wide plains gave way to low hills, marching upward in broken ranges. Far to the north he caught a glimpse of towering mountains, blue with the distance, or white with the eternal snows. Above these mountains shone the flaring rays of the borealis. They spread fan-wise into the sky, frosty blades of cold flaming light, changing in color, growing and brightening.

Above him the skies glowed and crackled with strange lights and gleams. The snow shone weirdly, now frosty blue, now icy crimson, now cold silver. Through a shimmering icy realm of enchantment Conan plunged doggedly onward, in a crystalline maze where the only reality was the white body dancing across the glittering snow beyond his reach – ever beyond his reach.

He did not wonder at the strangeness of it all, not even when two gigantic figures rose up to bar his way. The scales of their mail were white with hoar-frost; their helmets and their axes were covered with ice. Snow sprinkled their

locks; in their beards were spikes of icicles; their eyes were cold as the lights that streamed above them.

“Brothers!” cried the girl, dancing between them. “Look who follows! I have brought you a man to slay! Take his heart that we may lay it smoking on our father’s board!”

The giants answered with roars like the grinding of ice-bergs on a frozen shore and heaved up their shining axes as the maddened Cimmerian hurled himself upon them. A frosty blade flashed before his eyes, blinding him with its brightness, and he gave back a terrible stroke that sheared through his foe’s thigh. With a groan the victim fell, and at the instant Conan was dashed into the snow, his left shoulder numb from the blow of the survivor, from which the Cimmerian’s mail had barely saved his life. Conan saw the remaining giant looming high above him like a colossus carved of ice, etched against the cold glowing sky. The axe fell, to sink through the snow and deep into the frozen earth as Conan hurled himself aside and leaped to his feet. The giant roared and wrenched his axe free, but even as he did, Conan’s sword sang down. The giant’s knees bent and he sank slowly into the snow, which turned crimson with the blood that gushed from his half-severed neck.

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Conan wheeled, to see the girl standing a short distance away, staring at him in wide-eyed horror, all the mockery gone from her face. He cried out fiercely and the blood-drops flew from his sword as his hand shook in the intensity of his passion.

“Call the rest of your brothers!” he cried. “I’ll give their hearts to the wolves! You can not escape me –”

With a cry of fright she turned and ran fleetly. She did not laugh now, nor mock him over her white shoulder. She ran as for her life, and though he strained every nerve and thew, until his temples were like to burst and the snow swam red to his gaze, she drew away from him, dwindling in the witch-fire of the skies, until she was a figure no bigger than a child, then a dancing white flame on the snow, then a dim blur in the distance. But grinding his teeth until the blood started from his gums, he reeled on, and he saw the blur grow to a dancing white flame, and the flame to a figure big as a child; and then she was running less than a hundred paces ahead of him, and slowly the space narrowed, foot by foot.

She was running with effort now, her golden locks blowing free; he heard the quick panting of her breath, and saw a flash of fear in the look she cast over her white shoulder. The grim endurance of the barbarian had served him well. The speed ebbed from her flashing white legs; she reeled in her gait. In his untamed soul leaped up the fires of hell she had fanned so well.

With an inhuman roar he closed in on her, just as she wheeled with a haunting cry and flung out her arms to fend him off.

His sword fell into the snow as he crushed her to him. Her lithe body bent backward as she fought with desperate frenzy in his iron arms. Her golden hair blew about his face, blinding him with its sheen; the feel of her slender body twisting in his mailed arms drove him to blinder madness. His strong fingers sank deep into her smooth flesh; and that flesh was cold as ice. It was as if he embraced not a woman of human flesh and blood, but a woman of flaming ice. She writhed her golden head aside, striving to avoid the fierce kisses that bruised her red lips.

“You are cold as the snows,” he mumbled dazedly. “I will warm you with the fire in my own blood –”

With a scream and a desperate wrench she slipped from his arms, leaving her single gossamer garment in his grasp. She sprang back and faced him, her golden locks in wild disarray, her white bosom heaving, her beautiful eyes blazing with terror. For an instant he stood frozen, awed by her terrible beauty as she posed naked against the snows.

And in that instant she flung her arms toward the lights that glowed in the skies above her and 43

cried out in a voice that rang in Conan’s ears for ever after: “Ymir! Oh, my father, save me!”

Conan was leaping forward, arms spread to seize her, when with a crack like the breaking of an ice mountain, the whole skies leaped into icy fire. The girl’s ivory body was suddenly enveloped in a cold blue flame so blinding that the Cimmerian threw up his hands to shield his eyes from the intolerable blaze. A fleeting instant, skies and snowy hills were bathed in crackling white flames, blue darts of icy light, and frozen crimson fires. Then Conan staggered and cried out. The girl was gone. The glowing snow lay empty and bare; high above his head the witch-lights flashed and played in a frosty sky

gone mad, and among the distant blue mountains there sounded a rolling thunder as of a gigantic war-chariot rushing behind steeds whose frantic hoofs struck lightning from the snows and echoes from the skies.

Then suddenly the borealis, the snow-clad hills and the blazing heavens reeled drunkenly to Conan's sight; thousands of fire-balls burst with showers of sparks, and the sky itself became a titanic wheel which rained stars as it spun. Under his feet the snowy hills heaved up like a wave, and the Cimmerian crumpled into the snows to lie motionless.

In a cold dark universe, whose sun was extinguished eons ago, Conan felt the movement of life, alien and unguessed. An earthquake had him in its grip and was shaking him to and fro, at the same time chafing his hands and feet until he yelled in pain and fury and groped for his sword.

"He's coming to, Horsa," said a voice. "Haste – we must rub the frost out of his limbs, if he's ever to wield sword again."

"He won't open his left hand," growled another. "He's clutching something –"

Conan opened his eyes and stared into the bearded faces that bent over him. He was surrounded by tall golden-haired warriors in mail and furs.

"Conan! You live!"

"By Crom, Niord," gasped the Cimmerian. "Am I alive, or are we all dead and in Valhalla?"

"We live," grunted the Æsir, busy over Conan's half-frozen feet. "We had to fight our way through an ambush, or we had come up with you before the battle was joined. The corpses were scarce cold when we came upon the field. We did not find you among the dead, so we followed your spoor. In Ymir's name, Conan, why did you wander off into the wastes of the north? We have followed your tracks in the snow for hours. Had a blizzard come up and hidden them, we had never found you, by Ymir!"

"Swear not so often by Ymir," uneasily muttered a warrior, glancing at the distant mountains.

“This is his land and the god bides among yonder mountains, the legends say.”

“I saw a woman,” Conan answered hazily. “We met Bragi’s men in the plains. I know not how long we fought. I alone lived. I was dizzy and faint. The land lay like a dream before me. Only now do all things seem natural and familiar. The woman came and taunted me. She was beautiful as a frozen flame from hell. A strange madness fell upon me when I looked at her, so I forgot all else in the world. I followed her. Did you not find her tracks? Or the giants in icy mail I slew?”

Niord shook his head.

“We found only your tracks in the snow, Conan.”

“Then it may be I am mad,” said Conan dazedly. “Yet you yourself are no more real to me than was the golden-locked witch who fled naked across the snows before me. Yet from under my very hands she vanished in icy flame.”

“He is delirious,” whispered a warrior.

“Not so!” cried an older man, whose eyes were wild and weird. “It was Atali, the daughter of Ymir, the frost-giant! To fields of the dead she comes, and shows herself to the dying! Myself when a boy I saw her, when I lay half-slain on the bloody field of Wolraven. I saw her walk among the dead in the snows, her naked body gleaming like ivory and her golden hair unbearably bright in the moonlight. I lay and howled like a dying dog because I could not crawl after her. She lures men from stricken fields into the wastelands to be slain by her brothers, the ice-giants, who lay men’s red hearts smoking on Ymir’s board. The Cimmerian has seen Atali, the frost-giant’s daughter!”

“Bah!” grunted Horsa. “Old Gorm’s mind was touched in his youth by a sword cut on the head.

Conan was delirious from the fury of battle – look how his helmet is dinted. Any of those blows might have addled his brain. It was an hallucination he followed into the wastes. He is from the south; what does he know of Atali?”

“You speak truth, perhaps,” muttered Conan. “It was all strange and weird – by Crom!”

He broke off, glaring at the object that still dangled from his clenched left fist; the others gaped silently at the veil he held up – a wisp of gossamer that was

never spun by human distaff.

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The Coming of Conan The Cimmerian

The God in the Bowl

The God in the Bowl

Arus the watchman grasped his crossbow with shaky hands, and he felt beads of clammy perspiration on his skin as he stared at the unlovely corpse sprawling on the polished floor before him. It is not pleasant to come upon Death in a lonely place at midnight.

Arus stood in a vast corridor, lighted by huge candles in niches along the walls. These walls were hung with black velvet tapestries, and between the tapestries hung shields and crossed weapons of fantastic make. Here and there too, stood figures of curious gods – images carved of stone or rare wood, or cast of bronze, iron or silver – dimly reflected in the gleaming black mahogany floor.

Arus shuddered; he had never become used to the place, although he had worked there as watchman for some months. It was a fantastic establishment, the great museum and antique house which men called Kallian Publico's Temple, with its rarities from all over the world –

and now, in the lonesomeness of midnight, Arus stood in the great silent hall and stared at the sprawling corpse that had been the rich and powerful owner of the Temple.

It entered even the dull brain of the watchman that the man looked strangely different now, than when he rode along the Palian Way in his golden chariot, arrogant and dominant, with his dark eyes glinting with magnetic vitality. Men who had hated and feared Kallian Publico would scarcely have recognized him now as he lay like a disintegrated tun of fat, his rich robe half torn from him, and his purple tunic awry. His face was blackened, his eyes almost starting from his head, and his tongue lolled blackly from his gaping mouth. His fat hands were thrown out as in a gesture of curious futility. On the thick fingers gems glittered.

"Why didn't they take his rings?" muttered the watchman uneasily, then he started and glared, the short hairs prickling at the nape of his neck. Through

the dark silken hangings that masked one of the many doorways opening into the hallway, came a figure.

Arus saw a tall powerfully built youth, naked but for a loin-cloth, and sandals strapped high about his ankles. His skin was burned brown as by the suns of the wastelands, and Arus glanced nervously at his broad shoulders, massive chest and heavy arms. A single look at the moody, broad-browed features told the watchman that the man was no Nemedian. From under a mop of unruly black hair smoldered a pair of dangerous blue eyes. A long sword hung in a leather scabbard at his girdle.

Arus felt his skin crawl, and he fingered his crossbow tensely, of half a mind to drive a bolt through the stranger's body without parley, yet fearful of what might happen if he failed to inflict death at the first shot.

The stranger looked at the body on the floor more in curiosity than surprize.

"Why did you kill him?" asked Arus nervously.

The other shook his tousled head.

"I didn't kill him," he answered, speaking Nemedian with a barbaric accent. "Who is he?"

"Kallian Publico," replied Arus, edging back.

A flicker of interest showed in the moody blue eyes.

"The owner of the house?"

"Aye." Arus had edged his way to the wall, and now he took hold of a thick velvet rope which swung there, and jerked it violently. From the street outside sounded the strident clang of the bell that hung before all shops and establishments to summon the watch.

The stranger started.

"Why did you do that?" he asked. "It will fetch the watchman."

"I am the watchman, knave," answered Arus, bracing his rocking courage.

“Stand where you are; don’t move or I’ll loose a bolt through you.”

His finger was on the trigger of his arbalest, the wicked square head of the quarrel leveled full on the other’s broad breast. The stranger scowled and his dark face was lowering. He showed no fear, but seemed to be hesitating in his mind as to whether he should obey the command or chance a sudden break of some kind. Arus licked his lips and his blood turned cold as he plainly saw indecision struggle with a murderous intent in the foreigner’s cloudy eyes.

Then he heard a door crash open, and a medley of voices, and he drew a deep breath of amazed thankfulness. The stranger tensed and glared worriedly, like a startled hunting beast, as half a dozen men entered the hall. All but one wore the scarlet tunic of the Numalian police, were girt with stabbing swords and carried bills – long shafted weapons, half pike, half axe.

“What devil’s work is this?” exclaimed the foremost man, whose cold grey eyes and lean keen features, no less than his civilian garments, set him apart from his burly companions.

“By Mitra, Demetrio!” exclaimed Arus thankfully. “Fortune is assuredly with me tonight. I had no hope that the watch would answer the summons so swiftly – or that you would be with them!”

“I was making the rounds with Dionus,” answered Demetrio. “We were just passing the Temple when the watch-bell clanged. But who is this? Mitra! The master of the Temple himself!”

“No other,” replied Arus, “and foully murdered. It is my duty to walk about the building steadily all night, because, as you know, there is an immense amount of wealth stored here.

Kallian Publico had rich patrons – scholars, princes and wealthy collectors of rarities. Well, only a few minutes ago I tried the door which opens on the portico, and found it to be only bolted. The door is provided with a bolt, which works both from within or without, and a great lock which can be worked only from without. Only Kallian Publico had a key to that, the key which you see now hanging at his girdle.

“Naturally my suspicions were roused, for Kallian Publico always locks the

door with the great lock when he closes the Temple; and I had not seen him return since he left earlier in the evening for his villa in the eastern suburbs of the city. I have a key that works the bolt; I entered and found the body lying as you see. I have not touched it."

"So," Demetrio's keen eyes swept the sombre stranger. "And who is this?"

"The murderer, without doubt!" cried Arus. "He came from that door yonder. He is a northern barbarian of some sort – a Hyperborean or a Bossonian, perhaps."

"Who are you?" asked Demetrio.

"I am Conan," answered the barbarian. "I am a Cimmerian."

"Did you kill this man?"

The Cimmerian shook his head.

"Answer me!" snapped the questioner.

An angry glint rose in the moody blue eyes.

"I am no dog," he replied resentfully.

"Oh, an insolent fellow!" sneered Demetrio's companion, a big man wearing the insignia of prefect of police. "An independent cur! One of these citizens with rights, eh? I'll soon knock it out of him! Here, you! Come clean! Why did you murder –"

"Just a moment, Dionus," ordered Demetrio curtly. "Fellow, I am chief of the Inquisitorial Council of the city of Numalia. You had best tell me why you are here, and if you are not the murderer, prove it."

The Cimmerian hesitated. He was not afraid, but slightly bewildered, as a barbarian always is when confronted by the evidence of civilized networks and systems, the workings of which are so baffling and mysterious to him.

"While he's thinking it over," rapped Demetrio, turning to Arus, "tell me – did you see Kallian Publico leave the Temple this evening?"

“No, he’s usually gone when I arrive to begin my sentry-go. But the great door was bolted and locked.”

“Could he have entered the building again without your having seen him?”

“Why, it’s possible, but hardly probable. The Temple is large, and I walk clear around it in a few minutes. If he had returned from his villa, he would of course have come in his chariot, for it is a long way – and who ever heard of Kallian Publico travelling otherwise? Even if I had been on the other side of the Temple, I’d have heard the wheels of the chariot on the cobblestones. And I’ve heard no such thing, nor seen any chariots, except those which always pass along the streets just at dusk.”

“And the door was locked earlier in the night?”

“I’ll swear to it. I try all doors several times during the night. The door was locked on the outside until perhaps half an hour ago – that was the last time I tried it, until I found it unlocked.”

“You heard no cries or struggles?”

“No. But that’s not strange. The walls of the Temple are so thick, they’re practically soundproof – an effect increased by the heavy hangings.”

“Why go to all this trouble of questions and speculations?” complained the burly prefect. “It’s 49

much easier to beat a confession out of a suspect. Here’s our man, no doubt about it. Let’s take him to the Court of Justice – I’ll get a statement if I have to smash his bones to a pulp.”

Demetrio looked at the barbarian.

“You understand what he said?” asked the Inquisitor. “What have you to say?”

“That any man who touches me will quickly be greeting his ancestors in hell,” the Cimmerian ground between his powerful teeth, his eyes glinting quick flames of dangerous anger.

“Why did you come here, if not to kill this man?” pursued Demetrio.

“I came to steal,” sullenly answered the other.

“To steal what?” rapped the Inquisitor.

“Food,” the reply came after an instant’s hesitation.

“That’s a lie!” snapped Demetrio. “You knew there was no food here. Don’t lie to me. Tell me the truth or –”

The Cimmerian laid his hand on his sword hilt, and the gesture was as fraught with menace as the lifting of a tiger’s lip to bare his fangs.

“Save your bullying for the fools who fear you,” he growled, blue fires smoldering in his eyes.

“I’m no city-bred Nemedian to cringe before your hired dogs. I’ve killed better men than you for less than this.”

Dionus, who had opened his mouth to bellow in wrath, closed it suddenly. The watchmen shifted their bills uncertainly and glanced at Demetrio for orders. They were struck speechless at hearing the all-powerful police thus bearded and expected a command to seize the barbarian.

But Demetrio did not give it. He knew, if the others were too stupid to know, the steel-trap muscles and blinding quickness of men raised beyond civilization’s frontiers where life was a continual battle for existence, and he had no desire to loose the barbaric frenzy of the Cimmerian if it could be avoided. Besides, there was a doubt in his mind.

“I have not accused you of killing Kallian,” he snapped. “But you must admit the appearances are against you. How did you enter the Temple?”

“I hid in the shadows of the warehouse which stands behind this building,” Conan answered grudgingly. “When this dog” – jerking a thumb at Arus – “passed by and rounded the corner, I 50

ran quickly to the wall and scaled it –”

“A lie!” broke in Arus. “No man could climb that straight wall!”

“Did you ever see a Cimmerian scale a sheer cliff?” asked Demetrio impatiently. “I am conducting this investigation. Go on, Conan.”

“The corner is decorated with carvings,” said the Cimmerian. “It was easy to climb. I gained the roof before this dog came around the building again. I went across the roof until I came upon a trap-door which was fastened with an iron bolt that went through it and was locked on the inside. I was forced to hew the bolt in twain with my sword –”

Arus, remembering the thickness of that bolt, gulped involuntarily and moved further back from the barbarian, who scowled abstractedly at him, and continued.

“I feared the noise might wake somebody, but it was a chance I had to take. I passed through the trap-door and came into an upper chamber. I didn’t pause there, but came straightway to the stair –”

“How did you know where the stair was?” snapped the Inquisitor. “I know that only Kallian’s servants, and his rich patrons were ever allowed in those upper rooms.”

A dogged stubbornness shadowed Conan’s eyes and he remained silent.

“What did you do after you reached the stair?” demanded Demetrio.

“I came straight down it,” muttered the Cimmerian. “It let into the chamber behind yonder curtained door. As I came down the stairs I heard the noise of a door being opened. When I looked through the hangings I saw this dog standing over the dead man.”

“Why did you come from your hiding place?”

“It was dark when I saw the watchman outside the Temple. When I saw him here I thought he was a thief too. It was not until he jerked the watch-bell rope and lifted his bow that I knew he was the watchman.”

“But even so,” persisted the Inquisitor, “why did you reveal yourself?”

“I thought perhaps he had come to steal what –” the Cimmerian checked himself suddenly as if he had said too much.

“– What you had come after, yourself!” finished Demetrio. “You have told me

more than you intended! You came here with a definite purpose. You did not, by your own admission, tarry in the upper rooms, where the richest goods are generally stored. You knew the plan of the building – you were sent here by some one who knows the Temple well, to steal some special thing!"

"And to kill Kallian Publico!" exclaimed Dionus. "By Mitra, we've hit it! Grab him, men!

We'll have a confession before morning!"

With a heathen curse Conan leaped back, whipping out his sword with a viciousness that made the keen blade hum.

"Back, if you value your dog-lives!" he snarled, his blue eyes blazing. "Because you dare to torture shop-keepers and strip and beat harlots to make them talk, don't think you can lay your fat paws on a hillman! I'll take some of you to hell with me! Fumble with your bow, watchman

– I'll burst your guts with my heel before this night's work is over!"

"Wait!" interposed Demetrio. "Call your dogs off, Dionus. I'm not convinced that he is the murderer. You fool," he added in a whisper, "wait until we can summon more men, or trick him into laying down his sword." Demetrio did not wish to forego the advantage of his civilized mind by allowing matters to change to a physical basis, where the wild beast ferocity of the barbarian might even balance the odds against him.

“Very well,” grunted Dionus grudgingly. “Fall back, men, but keep an eye on him.”

“Give me your sword,” said Demetrio.

“Take it if you can,” snarled Conan. Demetrio shrugged his shoulders.

“Very well. But don’t try to escape. Four men with crossbows watch the house on the outside.

We always throw a cordon about a house before we enter it.”

The barbarian lowered his blade, though he only slightly relaxed the tense watchfulness of his attitude. Demetrio turned again to the corpse.

“Strangled,” he muttered. “Why strangle him when a sword-stroke is so much quicker and surer? These Cimmerians are a bloody race, born with a sword in their hand, as it were; I never heard of them killing a man in this manner.”

“Perhaps to divert suspicion,” muttered Dionus.

“Possibly.” He felt the body with experienced hands. “Dead possibly half an hour,” he muttered. “If Conan tells the truth about when he entered the Temple he would hardly have had time to commit the murder before Arus entered. But he may be lying – he might have broken in earlier.”

“I climbed the wall after Arus made the last round,” Conan growled.

“So *you* say.” Demetrio brooded for a space over the dead man’s throat, which had been literally crushed to a pulp of purplish flesh. The head sagged awry on splintered vertebrae.

Demetrio shook his head in doubt.

“Why should a murderer use a pliant cable apparently thicker than a man’s arm?” he muttered.

“And what terrible constriction was applied to so crush the man’s heavy neck.”

He rose and walked to the nearest door opening into the corridor.

“Here is a bust knocked from a stand near the door,” he said, “and here the polished floor is scratched, and the hangings in the doorway are pulled awry as if a clutching hand had grasped them – perhaps for support. Kallian Publico must have been attacked in that room. Perhaps he broke away from the assailant, or dragged the fellow with him as he fled. Anyway, he ran staggeringly out into the corridor where the murderer must have followed and finished him.”

“And if this heathen isn’t the murderer, where is he?” demanded the prefect.

“I haven’t exonerated the Cimmerian yet,” snapped the Inquisitor. “But we’ll investigate that room –”

He halted and wheeled, listening. From the street had sounded a sudden rattle of chariot-wheels, which approached rapidly, then ceased abruptly.

“Dionus!” snapped the Inquisitor. “Send two men to find that chariot. Bring the driver here.”

“From the sound,” said Arus, who was familiar with all the noises of the street, “I’d say that it stopped in front of Promero’s house, just on the other side of the silk-merchant’s shop.”

“Who is Promero?” asked Demetrio.

“Kallian Publico’s chief clerk.”

“Bring him here with the chariot driver,” snapped Demetrio. “We’ll wait until they come before we examine that room.”

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Two guardsmen clomped away. Demetrio still studied the body; Dionus, Arus, and the remaining policemen watched Conan, who stood sword in hand, like a bronze figure of brooding menace. Presently sandalled feet re-echoed outside, and the two guardsmen entered with a strongly built dark skinned man in the helmet and tunic of a charioteer, with a whip in his hand, and a small timid looking individual, typical of that class which, risen from the ranks of artizans, supplies righthand men for wealthy merchants and traders.

This one recoiled with a cry from the sprawling bulk on the floor.

“Oh, I knew evil would come of this!”

“You are Promero, the clerk, I suppose. And you?”

“Enaro, Kallian Publico’s charioteer.”

“You do not seem overly moved at the sight of his corpse,” observed Demetrio.

“Why should I be moved?” The dark eyes flashed. “Some one has only done what I dared not, but longed to do.”

“So!” murmured the Inquisitor. “Are you a free man?”

Enaro’s eyes were bitter as he drew aside his tunic, showing the brand of the debtor-slave on his shoulder.

“Did you know your master was coming here tonight?”

“No. I brought the chariot to the Temple this evening for him as usual. He entered it and I drove toward his villa. But before we came to the Palian Way, he ordered me to turn and drive him back. He seemed much agitated in his mind.”

“And did you drive him back to the Temple?”

“No. He bade me stop at Promero’s house. There he dismissed me, ordering me to return there for him shortly after midnight.”

“What time was this?”

“Shortly after dusk. The streets were almost deserted.”

“What did you do then?”

“I returned to the slave quarters where I remained until it was time to return to Promero’s house. I drove straight there, and your men seized me as I talked with Promero in his door.”

“You have no idea why Kallian went to Promero’s house?”

“He didn’t speak of his business to his slaves.”

Demetrio turned to Promero. “What do you know about this?”

“Nothing,” the clerk’s teeth chattered as he spoke.

“Did Kallian Publico come to your house as the charioteer says?”

“Yes.”

“How long did he stay?”

“Only a few minutes. Then he left.”

“Did he come from your house to the Temple?”

“I don’t know!” the clerk’s voice was shrill with taut nerves.

“Why did he come to your house?”

“To—to talk matters of business with me.”

“You’re lying,” snapped Demetrio. “*Why did he come to your house?*”

“I don’t know! I don’t know anything!” Promero was growing hysterical. “I had nothing to do with it –”

“Make him talk, Dionus,” snapped Demetrio, and Dionus grunted and nodded to one of his men who, grinning savagely, moved toward the two captives.

“Do you know who I am?” he growled, thrusting his head forward and staring domineeringly at his shrinking prey.

“You’re Posthumo,” answered the charioteer sullenly. “You gouged out a girl’s eye in the Court of Justice because she wouldn’t give you information incriminating her lover.”

“I always get what I go after!” bellowed the guardsman, the veins in his thick

neck swelling, and his face growing purple, as he seized the wretched clerk by the collar of his tunic, twisting it so the man was half strangled.

“Speak up, you rat!” he growled. “Answer the Inquisitor.”

“Oh Mitra, mercy!” screamed the wretch. “I swear –”

Posthumo slapped him terrifically first on one side of the face and then on the other, and continued the interrogation by flinging him to the floor and kicking him with vicious accuracy.

“Mercy!” moaned the victim. “I’ll tell – I’ll tell anything –”

“Then get up, you cur!” roared Posthumo, swelling with self-importance. “Don’t lie there whining.”

Dionus cast a quick glance at Conan to see if he were properly impressed.

“You see what happens to those who cross the police,” he said.

The Cimmerian spat with a sneer of cruel contempt for the moaning clerk.

“He’s a weakling and a fool,” he growled. “Let one of you touch me and I’ll spill his guts on the floor.”

“Are you ready to talk?” asked Demetrio tiredly. He found these scenes wearingly monotonous.

“All I know,” sobbed the clerk, dragging himself to his feet and whimpering like a beaten dog in his pain, “is that Kallian came to my house shortly after I arrived – I left the Temple at the same time he did – and sent his chariot away. He threatened me with discharge if I ever spoke of it. I am a poor man, without friends or favor. Without my position with him, I would starve.”

“What’s that to me?” snapped Demetrio. “How long did he remain at your house?”

“Until perhaps half an hour before midnight. Then he left, saying that he was going to the Temple, and would return after he had done what he wished to do there.”

“What was he going to do there?”

Promero hesitated at revealing the secrets of his dreaded employer, then a shuddering glance at Posthumo, who was grinning evilly as he doubled his huge fist, opened his lips quickly.

“There was something in the Temple he wished to examine.”

“But why should he come here alone, and in so much secrecy?”

“Because it was not his property. It arrived in a caravan from the south, at dawn. The men of the caravan knew nothing of it, except that it had been placed with them by the men of a caravan from Stygia, and was meant for Kalanthes of Hanumar, priest of Ibis. The master of the caravan had been paid by these other men to deliver it directly to Kalanthes, but he’s a rascal by nature, and wished to proceed directly to Aquilonia, on the road to which Hanumar does not lie. So he asked if he might leave it in the Temple until Kalanthes could send for it.

“Kallian agreed, and told him he himself would send a runner to inform Kalanthes. But after the men had gone, and I spoke of the runner, Kallian forbade me to send him. He sat brooding over what the men had left.”

“And what was that?”

“A sort of sarcophagus, such as is found in ancient Stygian tombs, but this one was round, like a covered metal bowl. Its composition was something like copper, but much harder, and it was carved with hieroglyphics, like those found on the more ancient menhirs in southern Stygia.

The lid was made fast to the body by carven copper-like bands.”

“What was in it?”

“The men of the caravan did not know. They only said that the men who gave it to them told them that it was a priceless relic, found among the tombs far beneath the pyramids and sent to Kalanthes, ‘because of the love the sender bore the priest of Ibis.’ Kallian Publico believed that it contained the diadem of the giant-kings, of the people who dwelt in that dark land before the ancestors of the Stygians came there. He showed me a design carved on the lid, which he swore was the shape of the diadem which legend tells us the monster-kings wore.

“He determined to open the Bowl and see what it contained. He was like a madman when he thought of the fabled diadem, which myths say was set with the strange jewels known only to that ancient race, a single one of which is worth more than all the jewels of the modern world.

“I warned him against it. But he stayed at my house as I have said, and a short time before 57

midnight, he came alone to the Temple, hiding in the shadows until the watchman had passed to the other side of the building, then letting himself in with his belt-key. I watched him from the shadows of the silk shop, saw him enter the Temple, and then returned to my own house. If the diadem was in the Bowl, or anything else of great value, he intended hiding it somewhere in the Temple and slipping out again. Then on the morrow he would raise a great hue and cry, saying that thieves had broken into his house and stolen Kalanthes’ property. None would know of his prowlings but the charioteer and I, and neither of us would betray him.”

“But the watchman?” objected Demetrio.

“Kallian did not intend being seen by him; he planned to have him crucified as an accomplice of the thieves,” answered Promero. Arus gulped and turned pale as this duplicity of his employer came home to him.

“Where is this sarcophagus?” asked Demetrio. Promero pointed, and the Inquisitor grunted.

“So! The very room in which Kallian must have been attacked.”

Promero turned pale and twisted his thin hands.

“Why should a man in Stygia send Kalanthes a gift? Ancient gods and queer mummies have come up the caravan roads before, but who loves the priest of Ibis so well in Stygia, where they still worship the arch-demon Set who coils among the tombs in the darkness? The god Ibis has fought Set since the first dawn of the earth, and Kalanthes has fought Set’s priests all his life.

There is something dark and hidden here.”

“Show us this sarcophagus,” commanded Demetrio, and Promero hesitantly led the way. All followed, including Conan, who was apparently heedless of

the wary eye the guardsmen kept on him, and seemed merely curious. They passed through the torn hangings and entered the room, which was rather more dimly lighted than the corridor. Doors on each side gave into other chambers, and the walls were lined with fantastic images, gods of strange lands and far peoples. And Promero cried out sharply.

“Look! The Bowl! It’s open – and empty!”

In the center of the room stood a strange black cylinder, nearly four feet in height, and perhaps three feet in diameter at its widest circumference, which was half-way between the top and bottom. The heavy carven lid lay on the floor, and beside it a hammer and a chisel. Demetrio looked inside, puzzled an instant over the dim hieroglyphs, and turned to Conan.

“Is this what you came to steal?”

The barbarian shook his head.

“How could I bear it away? It is too big for one man to carry.”

“The bands were cut with this chisel,” mused Demetrio, “and in haste. There are marks where misstrokes of the hammer dinted the metal. We may assume that Kallian opened the Bowl.

Some one was hiding nearby – possibly in the hangings in the doorway. When Kallian had the Bowl open, the murderer sprang on him – or he might have killed Kallian and opened the Bowl himself.”

“This is a grisly thing,” shuddered the clerk. “It’s too ancient to be holy. Who ever saw metal like it in a sane world? It seems less destructible than Aquilonian steel, yet see how it is corroded and eaten away in spots. Look at the bits of black mold clinging in the grooves of the hieroglyphics; they smell as earth smells from far below the surface. And look – here on the lid!” The clerk pointed with a shaky finger. “What would you say it is?”

Demetrio bent closer to the carven design.

“I’d say it represents a crown of some sort,” he grunted.

“No!” exclaimed Promero. “I warned Kallian, but he would not believe me! It is a scaled serpent coiled with its tail in its mouth. It is the sign of Set, the Old Serpent, the god of the Stygians! This Bowl is too old for a human world – it is a relic of the time when Set walked the earth in the form of a man! The race which sprang from his loins laid the bones of their kings away in such cases as these, perhaps!”

“And you’ll say that those moldering bones rose up and strangled Kallian Publico and then walked away, perhaps,” derided Demetrio.

“It was no man who was laid to rest in that bowl,” whispered the clerk, his eyes wide and staring. “What human could lie in it?”

Demetrio swore disgustedly.

“If Conan is not the murderer,” he snapped, “the slayer is still somewhere in this building.

Dionus, and Arus, remain here with me, and you three prisoners stay here too. The rest of you search the house. The murderer could only have escaped – if he got away before Arus found the body – by the way Conan used in entering, and in that case the barbarian would have seen him, if he’s telling the truth.”

“I saw no one but this dog,” growled Conan, indicating Arus.

“Of course not, because you’re the murderer,” said Dionus. “We’re wasting time, but we’ll search the house as a formality. And if we find no one, I promise you shall burn! Remember the law, my black-haired savage – you go to the mines for killing a commoner, you hang for killing a tradesman, and for murdering a rich man, you burn!”

Conan answered with a wicked lift of his lip, baring his teeth, and the men began their search.

The listeners in the chamber heard them stamping upstairs and down, moving objects, opening doors and bellowing to one another through the rooms.

“Conan,” said Demetrio, “you know what it means if they find no one?”

“I didn’t kill him,” snarled the Cimmerian. “If he had sought to hinder me I’d have split his skull. But I did not see him until I saw his corpse.”

“I know that some one sent you here tonight, to steal at least,” said Demetrio. “By your silence you incriminate yourself in this murder as well. You had best speak. The mere fact of your being here is sufficient to send you to the mines for ten years, anyhow, whether you admit your guilt or not. But if you tell the whole tale, you may save yourself from the stake.”

“Well,” answered the barbarian grudgingly, “I came here to steal the Zamorian diamond goblet. A man gave me a diagram of the Temple and told me where to look for it. It is kept in that room,” Conan pointed, “in a niche in the floor under a copper Shemitish god.”

“He speaks truth there,” said Promero. “I’d thought that not half a dozen men in the world knew the secret of that hiding place.”

“And if you had secured it,” asked Dionus sneeringly, “would you really have taken it to the man who hired you? Or would you have kept it for yourself?”

Again the smoldering eyes flashed resentment.

“I am no dog,” the barbarian muttered. “I keep my word.”

“Who sent you here?” Demetrio demanded, but Conan kept a sullen silence.

The guardsmen were straggling back from their search.

“There’s no man hiding in this house,” they growled. “We’ve ransacked the place. We found the trap-door in the roof through which the barbarian entered, and the bolt he cut in half. A man escaping that way would have been seen by the guards we posted about the building, unless he 60

fled before we came. Then, besides, he would have had to stack tables or chairs or cases upon each other to reach it from below, and that has not been done. Why couldn’t he have gone out the front door just before Arus came around the building?”

“Because the door was bolted on the inside, and the only keys which will work that bolt are the one belonging to Arus and the one which still hangs on the girdle of Kallian Publico.”

“I’ve found the cable the murderer used,” one of them announced. “A black cable, thicker than a man’s arm, and curiously splotched.”

“Then where is it, fool?” exclaimed Dionus.

“In the chamber adjoining this one,” answered the guard. “It’s wrapped about a marble pillar, where no doubt the murderer thought it would be safe from detection. I couldn’t reach it. But it must be the right one.”

He led the way into a room filled with marble statuary, and pointed to a tall column, one of several which served a purpose more of ornament to set off the statues, than of utility. And then he halted and stared.

“It’s gone!” he cried.

“It never was there!” snorted Dionus.

“By Mitra, it was!” swore the guardsman. “Coiled about the pillar just above those carven leaves. It’s so shadowy up there near the ceiling I couldn’t tell much about it – but it was there.”

“You’re drunk,” snapped Demetrio, turning away. “That’s too high for a man to reach; and nothing but a snake could climb that smooth pillar.”

“A Cimmerian could,” muttered one of the men.

“Possibly. Say that Conan strangled Kallian, tied the cable about the pillar, crossed the corridor and hid in the room where the stair is. How then, could he have removed it after you saw it? He has been among us ever since Arus found the body. No, I tell you Conan didn’t commit the murder. I believe the real murderer killed Kallian to secure whatever was in the Bowl, and is hiding now in some secret nook in the Temple. If we can’t find him, we’ll have to put the blame on the barbarian, to satisfy Justice, but – where is Promero?”

They had returned to the silent body in the corridor. Dionus bellowed threateningly for 61

Promero, and the clerk came suddenly from the room in which stood the empty Bowl. He was shaking and his face was white.

“What now, man?” exclaimed Demetrio irritably.

“I found a symbol on the bottom of the Bowl!” chattered Promero. “Not an ancient hieroglyphic, but a symbol recently carved! The mark of Thoth-amon, the Stygian sorcerer, Kalanthes’ deadly foe! He found it in some grisly cavern below the haunted pyramids! The gods of old times did not die, as men died – they fell into long sleeps and their worshippers locked them in sarcophagi so that no alien hand might break their slumbers. Thoth-amon sent death to Kalanthes – Kallian’s greed caused him to loose the horror – and it is lurking somewhere near us – even now it may be creeping upon us –”

“You gibbering fool!” roared Dionus disgustedly, striking him heavily across the mouth.

Dionus was a materialist, with scant patience for eery speculations.

“Well, Demetrio,” he said, turning to the Inquisitor, “I see nothing else to do than to arrest this barbarian –”

The Cimmerian cried out suddenly and they wheeled. He was glaring toward the door of a chamber that adjoined the room of statues.

“Look!” he exclaimed. “I saw something move in that room – I saw it through the hangings.

Something that crossed the floor like a long dark shadow!”

“Bah!” snorted Posthumo. “We searched that room –”

“He saw something!” Promero’s voice shrilled and cracked with hysterical excitement. “This place is accursed! Something came out of the sarcophagus and killed Kallian Publico! It hid from you where no human could hide, and now it is in that room! Mitra defend us from the powers of Darkness! I tell you it was one of Set’s children in that grisly Bowl!” He caught Dionus’ sleeve with claw-like fingers. “You must search that room again!”

The prefect shook him off disgustedly, and Posthumo was inspired to a flight of humor.

“You shall search it yourself, clerk!” he said, grasping Promero by neck and girdle, and propelling the screaming wretch forcibly toward the door, outside of which he paused and hurled him into the room so violently the clerk fell and lay half-stunned.

“Enough of this,” growled Dionus, eyeing the silent Cimmerian. The prefect

lifted his hand, Conan’s eyes began to burn bluely, and a tension crackled in the air, when an interruption 62

came. A guardsman entered, dragging a slender, richly dressed figure.

“I saw him slinking about the back of the Temple,” quoth the guard, looking for commendation. Instead he received curses that lifted his hair.

“Release that gentleman, you bungling fool!” swore the prefect. “Don’t you know Aztrias Petanius, the nephew of the city’s governor?”

The abashed guard fell away and the foppish young nobleman brushed his embroidered sleeve fastidiously.

“Save your apologies, good Dionus,” he lisped affectedly. “All in line of duty, I know. I was returning from a late revel and walking to rid my brain of the wine fumes. What have we here?

By Mitra, is it murder?”

“Murder it is, my lord,” answered the prefect. “But we have a man who, though Demetrio seems to have doubts on the matter, will doubtless go to the stake for it.”

“A vicious looking brute,” murmured the young aristocrat. “How can any doubt his guilt? I have never seen such a villainous countenance before.”

“Yes, you have, you scented dog,” snarled the Cimmerian, “when you hired me to steal the Zamorian goblet for you. Revels, eh? Bah! You were waiting in the shadows for me to hand you the goblet. I would not have revealed your name, if you had given me fair words. Now tell these dogs that you saw me climb the wall after the watchman made the last round, so that they’ll know I didn’t have time to kill this fat swine before Arus entered and found the body.”

Demetrio looked quickly at Aztrias, who did not change color.

“If what he says is true, my lord,” said the Inquisitor, “it clears him of the murder, and we can easily hush up the matter of attempted theft. He is due ten years at hard labor for housebreaking, but if you say the word, we’ll arrange for him to escape and none but us will ever know anything about it. I

understand – you wouldn't be the first young nobleman who had to resort to such things to pay gambling debts and the like. You can rely on our discretion."

Conan looked at the young noble expectantly, but Aztrias shrugged his slender shoulders and covered a yawn with a delicate white hand.

"I know him not," he answered. "He is mad to say I hired him. Let him take his just deserts. He has a strong back and the toil in the mines will be well for him."

Conan's eyes blazed and he started as if stung; the guards tensed, grasping their bills, then relaxed as he dropped his head suddenly, as if in sullen resignation, and not even Demetrio could tell that he was watching them from under his heavy black brows, with eyes that were slits of blue bale-fire.

He struck with no more warning than a striking cobra; his sword flashed in the candle light.

Aztrias shrieked and his head flew from his shoulders in a shower of blood, the features frozen in a white mask of horror. Catlike Conan wheeled and thrust murderously for Demetrio's groin.

The Inquisitor's instinctive recoil barely deflected the point which sank into his thigh, glanced from the bone and ploughed out through the outer side of the leg. Demetrio went to his knee with a groan, unnerved and nauseated with agony.

Conan had not paused. The bill which Dionus flung up saved the prefect's skull from the whistling blade which turned slightly as it cut through the shaft, and sheared his ear cleanly from his head. The blinding speed of the barbarian paralyzed the senses of the police and made their actions futile gestures. Caught flat-footed and dazed by his quickness and ferocity, half of them would have been down before they had a chance to fight back, except that Posthumo, more by luck than skill, threw his arms about the Cimmerian, pinioning his sword-arm.

Conan's left hand leaped to the guard's head, and Posthumo fell away and writhed shrieking on the floor, clutching a gaping red socket where an eye had

been.

Conan bounded back from the waving bills and his leap carried him outside the ring of his foes, to where Arus stood fumbling at his crossbow. A savage kick in the belly dropped him, green faced and gagging, and Conan's sandalled heel crunched square in the watchman's mouth. The wretch screamed through a ruin of splintered teeth, blowing bloody froth from his mangled lips.

Then all were frozen in their tracks by the soul-shaking horror of a scream which rose from the chamber into which Posthumo had hurled Promero, and from the velvet hung door the clerk came reeling, and stood there, shaking with great silent sobs, tears running down his pasty face and dripping off his loose sagging lips, like an idiot-babe weeping.

All halted to stare at him aghast – Conan with his dripping sword, the police with their lifted bills, Demetrio crouching on the floor and striving to staunch the blood that jetted from the great gash in his thigh, Dionus clutching the bleeding stump of his severed ear, Arus weeping and spitting out fragments of broken teeth – even Posthumo ceased his howls and blinked whimpering through the bloody mist that veiled his half-sight.

Promero came reeling out into the corridor and fell stiffly before them. Screeching in an unbearable high-pitched laughter of madness, he cried shrilly, "The god has a long neck! Ha!

ha! ha! Oh, a long, a cursed long neck!" And then with a frightful convulsion he stiffened and lay grinning vacantly at the shadowy ceiling.

"He's dead!" whispered Dionus, awedly, forgetting his own hurt, and the barbarian who stood with his dripping sword so near him. He bent over the body, then straightened, his pig eyes flaring. "He's not wounded – *in Mitra's name what is in that chamber?"*

Then horror swept over them and they ran screaming for the outer door, jammed there in a clawing shrieking mob, and burst through like madmen. Arus followed and the half-blind Posthumo struggled up and blundered blindly after his fellows, squealing like a wounded pig and begging them not to leave him behind. He fell among them and they knocked him down and

trampled him, screaming in their fear. But he crawled after them, and after him came Demetrio. The Inquisitor had the courage to face the unknown, but he was unnerved and wounded, and the sword that had struck him down was still near him. Grasping his blood-spurting thigh, he limped after his companions. Police, charioteer and watchmen, wounded or whole, they burst screaming into the street, where the men watching the house took panic and joined in the flight, not waiting to ask why. Conan stood in the great corridor alone, save for the corpses on the floor.

The barbarian shifted his grip on his sword and strode into the chamber. It was hung with rich silken tapestries; silken cushions and couches lay strewn about in careless profusion; and over a heavy gilded screen a Face looked at the Cimmerian.

Conan stared in wonder at the cold classic beauty of that countenance, whose like he had never seen among the sons of men. Neither weakness nor mercy nor cruelty nor kindness, nor any other human emotion was in those features. They might have been the marble mask of a god, carved by a master hand, except for the unmistakable life in them – life cold and strange, such as the Cimmerian had never known and could not understand. He thought fleetingly of the marble perfection of the body which the screen concealed – it must be perfect, he thought, since the face was so inhumanly beautiful. But he could see only the god-like face, the finely molded head which swayed curiously from side to side. The full lips opened and spoke a single word, in a rich vibrant tone that was like the golden chimes that ring in the jungle-lost temples of Khitai. It was an unknown tongue, forgotten before the kingdoms of man arose, but Conan knew that it meant, “Come!”

And the Cimmerian came, with a desperate leap and a humming slash of his sword. The beautiful head rolled from the top of the screen in a jet of dark blood and fell at his feet, and he gave back, fearing to touch it. Then his skin crawled for the screen shook and heaved with the convulsions of something behind. Conan had seen and heard men die by the scores, and never had he heard a human being make such sounds in the death-throes. There was a thrashing, floundering noise, as if a great cable were being lashed violently about.

At last the movements ceased and Conan looked gingerly behind the screen. Then the full horror of it all rushed over the Cimmerian, and he fled, nor did he slacken his headlong flight 65

until the spires of Numalia faded into the dawn behind him. The thought of Set was like a nightmare, and the children of Set who once ruled the earth and who now sleep in their nighted caverns far below the black pyramids. Behind that gilded screen there had been no human body

– only the shimmering, headless coils of a gigantic serpent.

66

The Coming of Conan The Cimmerian

The Tower of the Elephant

The Tower of the Elephant

Torches flared murkily on the revels in the Maul, where the thieves of the east held carnival by night. In the Maul they could carouse and roar as they liked, for honest people shunned the quarters, and watchmen, well paid with stained coins, did not interfere with their sport. Along the crooked, unpaved streets with their heaps of refuse and sloppy puddles, drunken roisterers staggered, roaring. Steel glinted in the shadows where wolf preyed on wolf, and from the darkness rose the shrill laughter of women, and the sounds of scufflings and strugglings.

Torchlight licked luridly from broken windows and wide-thrown doors, and out of those doors, stale smells of wine and rank sweaty bodies, clamor of drinking-jacks and fists hammered on rough tables, snatches of obscene songs, rushed like a blow in the face.

In one of these dens merriment thundered to the low smoke-stained roof, where rascals gathered in every stage of rags and tatters – furtive cut-purses, leering kidnappers, quick-fingered thieves, swaggering bravoes with their wenches, strident-voiced women clad in tawdry finery. Native rogues were the dominant element – dark-skinned, dark-eyed Zamorians, with daggers at their girdles and guile in their hearts. But there were wolves of half a dozen outland nations there as well. There was a giant Hyperborean renegade, taciturn, dangerous, with a broadsword strapped to his great gaunt frame – for men wore steel openly in the Maul.

There was a Shemitish counterfeiter, with his hook nose and curled blue-black beard. There was a bold-eyed Brythunian wench, sitting on the knee of a tawny-haired Gunderman – a wandering mercenary soldier, a deserter from some defeated army. And the fat gross rogue whose bawdy jests were causing

all the shouts of mirth was a professional kidnapper come up from distant Koth to teach woman-stealing to Zamorians who were born with more knowledge of the art than he could ever attain.

This man halted in his description of an intended victim's charms, and thrust his muzzle into a huge tankard of frothing ale. Then blowing the foam from his fat lips, he said, "By Bel, god of all thieves, I'll show them how to steal wenches: I'll have her over the Zamorian border before dawn, and there'll be a caravan waiting to receive her. Three hundred pieces of silver, a count of Ophir promised me for a sleek young Brythunian of the better class. It took me weeks, wandering among the border cities as a beggar, to find one I knew would suit. And is she a pretty baggage!"

He blew a slobbery kiss in the air.

"I know lords in Shem who would trade the secret of the Elephant Tower for her," he said, returning to his ale.

A touch on his tunic sleeve made him turn his head, scowling at the interruption. He saw a tall, strongly made youth standing beside him. This person was as much out of place in that den as a gray wolf among mangy rats of the gutters. His cheap tunic could not conceal the hard, rangy lines of his powerful frame, the broad heavy shoulders, the massive chest, lean waist, and heavy arms. His skin was brown from outland suns, his eyes blue and smoldering; a shock of tousled black hair crowned his broad forehead. From his girdle hung a sword in a worn leather scabbard.

The Kothian involuntarily drew back; for the man was not one of any civilized race he knew.

"You spoke of the Elephant Tower," said the stranger, speaking Zamorian with an alien accent.

"I've heard much of this tower; what is its secret?"

The fellow's attitude did not seem threatening, and the Kothian's courage was bolstered up by the ale, and the evident approval of his audience. He swelled with self-importance.

“The secret of the Elephant Tower?” he exclaimed. “Why, any fool knows that Yara the priest dwells there with the great jewel men call the Elephant’s Heart, that is the secret of his magic.”

The barbarian digested this for a space.

“I have seen this tower,” he said. “It is set in a great garden above the level of the city, surrounded by high walls. I have seen no guards. The walls would be easy to climb. Why has not somebody stolen this secret gem?”

The Kothian stared wide-mouthed at the other’s simplicity, then burst into a roar of derisive mirth, in which the others joined.

“Harken to this heathen!” he bellowed. “He would steal the jewel of Yara! – Harken, fellow,”

he said, turning portentously to the other, “I suppose you are some sort of a northern barbarian

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“I am a Cimmerian,” the outlander answered, in no friendly tone. The reply and the manner of it meant little to the Kothian; of a kingdom that lay far to the south, on the borders of Shem, he knew only vaguely of the northern races.

“Then give ear and learn wisdom, fellow,” said he, pointing his drinking-jack at the discomfited youth. “Know that in Zamora, and more especially in this city, there are more bold thieves than anywhere else in the world, even Koth. If mortal man could have stolen the gem, be sure it would have been filched long ago. You speak of climbing the walls, but once having climbed, you would quickly wish yourself back again. There are no guards in the gardens at night for a very good reason – that is, no human guards. But in the watch-chamber, in the lower part of the tower, are armed men, and even if you passed those who roam the gardens by night, you must still pass through the soldiers, for the gem is kept somewhere in the tower above.”

“But if a man *could* pass through the gardens,” argued the Cimmerian, “why could he not come at the gem through the upper part of the tower and thus

avoid the soldiers?”

Again the Kothian gaped at him.

“Listen to him!” he shouted jeeringly. “The barbarian is an eagle who would fly to the jeweled rim of the tower, which is only a hundred and fifty feet above the earth, with rounded sides slicker than polished glass!”

The Cimmerian glared about, embarrassed at the roar of mocking laughter that greeted this remark. He saw no particular humor in it, and was too new to civilization to understand its discourtesies. Civilized men are more discourteous than savages because they know they can be impolite without having their skulls split, as a general thing. He was bewildered and chagrined, and doubtless would have slunk away, abashed, but the Kothian chose to goad him further.

“Come, come!” he shouted. “Tell these poor fellows, who have only been thieves since before you were spawned, tell them how you would steal the gem!”

“There is always a way, if the desire be coupled with courage,” answered the Cimmerian shortly, nettled.

The Kothian chose to take this as a personal slur. His face grew purple with anger.

“What!” he roared. “You dare tell us our business, and intimate that we are cowards? Get along; get out of my sight!” And he pushed the Cimmerian violently.

“Will you mock me and then lay hands on me?” grated the barbarian, his quick rage leaping up; and he returned the push with an open-handed blow that knocked his tormenter back against the rude-hewn table. Ale splashed over the jack’s lip, and the Kothian roared in fury, dragging at his sword.

“Heathen dog!” he bellowed. “I’ll have your heart for that!”

Steel flashed and the throng surged wildly back out of the way. In their flight they knocked over the single candle and the den was plunged in darkness,

broken by the crash of upset benches, drum of flying feet, shouts, oaths of people tumbling over one another, and a single strident yell of agony that cut the din like a knife. When a candle was relighted, most of the guests had gone out by doors and broken windows, and the rest huddled behind stacks of wine-kegs and under tables. The barbarian was gone; the center of the room was deserted except for the gashed body of the Kothian. The Cimmerian, with the unerring instinct of the barbarian, had killed his man in the darkness and confusion.

II

The lurid lights and drunken revelry fell away behind the Cimmerian. He had discarded his torn tunic, and walked through the night naked except for a loin-cloth and his high-strapped sandals. He moved with the supple ease of a great tiger, his steely muscles rippling under his brown skin.

He had entered the part of the city reserved for the temples. On all sides of him they glittered white in the starlight – snowy marble pillars and golden domes and silver arches, shrines of Zamora's myriad strange gods. He did not trouble his head about them; he knew that Zamora's religion, like all things of a civilized, long-settled people, was intricate and complex, and had lost most of the pristine essence in a maze of formulas and rituals. He had squatted for hours in the courtyards of the philosophers, listening to the arguments of theologians and teachers, and come away in a haze of bewilderment, sure of only one thing, and that, that they were all touched in the head.

His gods were simple and understandable; Crom was their chief, and he lived on a great mountain, whence he sent forth dooms and death. It was useless to call on Crom, because he was a gloomy, savage god, and he hated weaklings. But he gave a man courage at birth, and the will and might to kill his enemies, which, in the Cimmerian's mind, was all any god should be expected to do.

His sandalled feet made no sound on the gleaming pave. No watchmen passed, for even the thieves of the Maul shunned the temples, where strange dooms had been known to fall on violators. Ahead of him he saw, looming against the sky, the Tower of the Elephant. He mused, wondering why it was so named. No one seemed to know. He had never seen an elephant, but he vaguely understood that it was a monstrous animal, with a tail in front as well as behind.

This a wandering Shemite had told him, swearing that he had seen such beasts by the thousands in the country of the Hyrkanians; but all men knew what liars were the men of Shem. At any rate, there were no elephants in Zamora.

The shimmering shaft of the tower rose frostily in the stars. In the sunlight it shone so dazzlingly that few could bear its glare, and men said it was built of silver. It was round, a slim perfect cylinder, a hundred and fifty feet in height, and its rim glittered in the starlight with the great jewels which crusted it. The tower stood among the waving exotic trees of a garden raised high above the general level of the city. A high wall enclosed this garden, and outside the wall was a lower level, likewise enclosed by a wall. No lights shone forth; there seemed to be no windows in the tower – at least not above the level of the inner wall. Only the gems high above sparkled frostily in the starlight.

Shrubbery grew thick outside the lower, or outer wall. The Cimmerian crept close and stood beside the barrier, measuring it with his eye. It was high, but he could leap and catch the coping with his fingers. Then it would be child's play to swing himself up and over, and he did not doubt that he could pass the inner wall in the same manner. But he hesitated at the thought of the strange perils which were said to await within. These people were strange and mysterious to him; they were not of his kind – not even of the same blood as the more westerly Brythunians, Nemedians, Kothians and Aquilonians, whose civilized mysteries had awed him in times past. The people of Zamora were very ancient, and, from what he had seen of them, very evil.

He thought of Yara, the high priest, who worked strange dooms from this jeweled tower, and the Cimmerian's hair prickled as he remembered a tale told by a drunken page of the court –

how Yara had laughed in the face of a hostile prince, and held up a glowing, evil gem before him, and how rays shot blindingly from that unholy jewel, to envelop the prince, who screamed and fell down, and shrank to a withered blackened lump that changed to a black spider which scampered wildly about the chamber until Yara set his heel upon it.

Yara came not often from his tower of magic, and always to work evil on some man or some nation. The king of Zamora feared him more than he feared death, and kept himself drunk all the time because that fear was more than he could endure sober. Yara was very old – centuries old, men said, and added that he would live for ever because of the magic of his gem, which men called the Heart of the Elephant, for no better reason than they named his hold the Elephant's Tower.

The Cimmerian, engrossed in these thoughts, shrank quickly against the wall. Within the garden some one was passing, who walked with a measured stride. The listener heard the clink of steel. So after all a guard did pace those gardens. The Cimmerian waited, expected to hear him pass again, on the next round, but silence rested over the mysterious gardens.

At last curiosity overcame him. Leaping lightly he grasped the wall and swung himself up to the top with one arm. Lying flat on the broad coping, he looked down into the wide space between the walls. No shrubbery grew near him, though he saw some carefully trimmed bushes near the inner wall. The starlight fell on the even sward and somewhere a fountain tinkled.

The Cimmerian cautiously lowered himself down on the inside and drew his sword, staring about him. He was shaken by the nervousness of the wild at standing thus unprotected in the naked starlight, and he moved lightly around the curve of the wall, hugging its shadow, until he was even with the shrubbery he had noticed. Then he ran quickly toward it, crouching low, and almost tripped over a form that lay crumpled near the edges of the bushes.

A quick look to right and left showed him no enemy in sight at least, and he bent close to investigate. His keen eyes, even in the dim starlight, showed him a strongly built man in the silvered armor and crested helmet of the Zamorian royal guard. A shield and a spear lay near him, and it took but an instant’s examination to show that he had been strangled. The barbarian glanced about uneasily. He knew that this man must be the guard he had heard pass his hiding-place by the wall. Only a short time had passed, yet in that interval nameless hands had reached out of the dark and choked out the soldier’s life.

Straining his eyes in the gloom, he saw a hint of motion through the shrubs near the wall.

Thither he glided, gripping his sword. He made no more noise than a panther stealing through the night, yet the man he was stalking heard. The Cimmerian had a dim glimpse of a huge bulk close to the wall, felt relief that it was at least human; then the fellow wheeled quickly with a gasp that sounded like panic, made the first motion of a forward plunge, hands clutching, then recoiled as the Cimmerian’s blade caught the starlight. For a tense instant neither spoke, standing ready for anything.

“You are no soldier,” hissed the stranger at last. “You are a thief like myself.”

“And who are you?” asked the Cimmerian in a suspicious whisper.

“Taurus of Nemedia.”

The Cimmerian lowered his sword.

“I’ve heard of you. Men call you a prince of thieves.”

A low laugh answered him. Taurus was tall as the Cimmerian, and heavier; he was big-bellied and fat, but his every movement betokened a subtle dynamic magnetism, which was reflected in the keen eyes that glinted vitally, even in the starlight. He was barefooted and carried a coil of what looked like a thin, strong rope, knotted at regular intervals.

“Who are you?” he whispered.

“Conan, a Cimmerian,” answered the other. “I came seeking a way to steal Yara’s jewel, that men call the Elephant’s Heart.”

Conan sensed the man’s great belly shaking in laughter, but it was not derisive.

“By Bel, god of thieves!” hissed Taurus. “I had thought only myself had courage to attempt *that* poaching. These Zamorians call themselves thieves – bah! Conan, I like your grit. I never shared an adventure with any one, but by Bel, we’ll attempt this together if you’re willing.”

“Then you are after the gem, too?”

“What else? I’ve had my plans laid for months, but you, I think, have acted on a sudden impulse, my friend.”

“You killed the soldier?”

“Of course. I slid over the wall when he was on the other side of the garden. I hid in the bushes; he heard me, or thought he heard something. When he came blundering over, it was no trick at all to get behind him and suddenly grip his neck and choke out his fool’s life. He was like most men, half blind in the

dark. A good thief should have eyes like a cat."

"You made one mistake," said Conan.

Taurus' eyes flashed angrily.

"I? I, a mistake? Impossible!"

"You should have dragged the body into the bushes."

"Said the novice to the master of the art. They will not change the guard until past midnight.

Should any come searching for him now, and find his body, they would flee at once to Yara, bellowing the news, and give us time to escape. Were they not to find it, they'd go beating up the bushes and catch us like rats in a trap."

"You are right," agreed Conan.

"So. Now attend. We waste time in this cursed discussion. There are no guards in the inner garden – human guards, I mean, though there are sentinels even more deadly. It was their presence which baffled me for so long, but I finally discovered a way to circumvent them."

"What of the soldiers in the lower part of the tower?"

"Old Yara dwells in the chambers above. By that route we will come – and go, I hope. Never mind asking me how. I have arranged a way. We'll steal down through the top of the tower and strangle old Yara before he can cast any of his accursed spells on us. At least we'll try; it's the chance of being turned into a spider or a toad, against the wealth and power of the world. All good thieves must know how to take risks."

"I'll go as far as any man," said Conan, slipping off his sandals.

"Then follow me." And turning, Taurus leaped up, caught the wall and drew himself up. The man's suppleness was amazing, considering his bulk; he seemed almost to glide up over the edge of the coping. Conan followed him, and lying flat on the broad top, they spoke in wary whispers.

“I see no light,” Conan muttered. The lower part of the tower seemed much like that portion visible from outside the garden – a perfect, gleaming cylinder, with no apparent openings.

“There are cleverly constructed doors and windows,” answered Taurus, “but they are closed.

The soldiers breathe air that comes from above.”

The garden was a vague pool of shadows, where feathery bushes and low spreading trees waved darkly in the starlight. Conan’s wary soul felt the aura of waiting menace that brooded over it. He felt the burning glare of unseen eyes, and he caught a subtle scent that made the short hairs on his neck instinctively bristle as a hunting dog bristles at the scent of an ancient enemy.

“Follow me,” whispered Taurus, “keep behind me, as you value your life.”

Taking what looked like a copper tube from his girdle, the Nemedian dropped lightly to the sward inside the wall. Conan was close behind him, sword ready, but Taurus pushed him back, close to the wall, and showed no inclination to advance, himself. His whole attitude was of tense expectancy, and his gaze, like Conan’s, was fixed on the shadowy mass of shrubbery a few yards away. This shrubbery was shaken, although the breeze had died down. Then two great eyes blazed from the waving shadows, and behind them other sparks of fire glinted in the darkness.

“Lions!” muttered Conan.

“Aye. By day they are kept in subterranean caverns below the tower. That’s why there are no guards in this garden.”

Conan counted the eyes rapidly.

“Five in sight; maybe more back in the bushes. They’ll charge in a moment –”

“Be silent!” hissed Taurus, and he moved out from the wall, cautiously as if treading on razors, lifting the slender tube. Low rumblings rose from the shadows and the blazing eyes moved forward. Conan could sense the great slavering jaws, the tufted tails lashing tawny sides. The air grew tense – the

Cimmerian gripped his sword, expecting the charge and the irresistible hurtling of giant bodies. Then Taurus brought the mouth of the tube to his lips and blew powerfully. A long jet of yellowish powder shot from the other end of the tube and billowed out instantly in a thick green-yellow cloud that settled over the shrubbery, blotting out the glaring eyes.

Taurus ran back hastily to the wall. Conan glared without understanding. The thick cloud hid the shrubbery, and from it no sound came.

“What is that mist?” the Cimmerian asked uneasily.

“Death!” hissed the Nemedian. “If a wind springs up and blows it back upon us, we must flee over the wall. But no, the wind is still, and now it is dissipating. Wait until it vanishes entirely.

To breathe it is death.”

Presently only yellowish shreds hung ghostlily in the air; then they were gone, and Taurus motioned his companion forward. They stole toward the bushes, and Conan gasped. Stretched out in the shadows lay five great tawny shapes, the fire of their grim eyes dimmed for ever. A sweetish cloying scent lingered in the atmosphere.

“They died without a sound!” muttered the Cimmerian. “Taurus, what was that powder?”

“It was made from the black lotus, whose blossoms wave in the lost jungles of Khitai, where only the yellow-skulled priests of Yun dwell. Those blossoms strike dead any who smell of them.”

Conan knelt beside the great forms, assuring himself that they were indeed beyond power of harm. He shook his head; the magic of the exotic lands was mysterious and terrible to the barbarians of the north.

“Why can you not slay the soldiers in the tower in the same way?” he asked.

“Because that was all the powder I possessed. The obtaining of it was a feat which in itself was enough to make me famous among the thieves of the world. I stole it out of a caravan bound for Stygia, and I lifted it, in its cloth-

of-gold bag, out of the coils of the great serpent which guarded it, without awaking him. But come, in Bel's name! Are we to waste the night in discussion?"

They glided through the shrubbery to the gleaming foot of the tower, and there, with a motion enjoining silence, Taurus unwound his knotted cord, on one end of which was a strong steel hook. Conan saw his plan, and asked no questions as the Nemedian gripped the line a short distance below the hook, and began to swing it about his head. Conan laid his ear to the smooth wall and listened, but could hear nothing. Evidently the soldiers within did not suspect the presence of intruders, who had made no more sound than the night wind blowing through the trees. But a strange nervousness was on the barbarian; perhaps it was the lion-smell which was over everything.

Taurus threw the line with a smooth, ripping motion of his mighty arm. The hook curved upward and inward in a peculiar manner, hard to describe, and vanished over the jeweled rim.

It apparently caught firmly, for cautious jerking and then hard pulling did not result in any slipping or giving.

"Luck the first cast," murmured Taurus. "I –"

It was Conan's savage instinct which made him wheel suddenly; for the death that was upon them made no sound. A fleeting glimpse showed the Cimmerian the giant tawny shape, rearing upright against the stars, towering over him for the death-stroke. No civilized man could have moved half so quickly as the barbarian moved. His sword flashed frostily in the starlight with every ounce of desperate nerve and thew behind it, and man and beast went down together.

Cursing incoherently beneath his breath, Taurus bent above the mass, and saw his companion's limbs move as he strove to drag himself from under the great weight that lay limply upon him.

A glance showed the startled Nemedian that the lion was dead, its slanting skull split in half.

He laid hold of the carcass, and by his aid, Conan thrust it aside and clambered up, still gripping his dripping sword.

"Are you hurt, man?" gasped Taurus, still bewildered by the stunning swiftness of that touch-and-go episode.

“No, by Crom!” answered the barbarian. “But that was as close a call as I’ve had in a life noways tame. Why did not the cursed beast roar as he charged?”

“All things are strange in this garden,” said Taurus. “The lions strike silently – and so do other deaths. But come – little sound was made in that slaying, but the soldiers might have heard, if they are not asleep or drunk. That beast was in some other part of the garden and escaped the death of the flowers, but surely there are no more. We must climb this cord – little need to ask a Cimmerian if he can.”

“If it will bear my weight,” grunted Conan, cleansing his sword on the grass.

“It will bear thrice my own,” answered Taurus. “It was woven from the tresses of dead women, which I took from their tombs at midnight, and steeped in the deadly wine of the upas tree, to give it strength. I will go first – then follow me closely.”

The Nemedian gripped the rope and crooking a knee about it, began the ascent; he went up like a cat, belying the apparent clumsiness of his bulk. The Cimmerian followed. The cord swayed and turned on itself, but the climbers were not hindered; both had made more difficult climbs before. The jeweled rim glittered high above them, jutting out from the perpendicular of the wall, so that the cord hung perhaps a foot from the side of the tower – a fact which added greatly to the ease of the ascent.

Up and up they went, silently, the lights of the city spreading out further and further to their sight as they climbed, the stars above them more and more dimmed by the glitter of the jewels along the rim. Now Taurus reached up a hand and gripped the rim itself, pulling himself up and over. Conan paused a moment on the very edge, fascinated by the great frosty jewels whose gleams dazzled his eyes—diamonds, rubies, emeralds, sapphires, turquoises, moonstones, set thick as stars in the shimmering silver. At a distance their different gleams had seemed to merge into a pulsing white glare; but now, at close range, they shimmered with a million rainbow tints and lights, hypnotizing him with their scintillations.

“There is a fabulous fortune here, Taurus,” he whispered; but the Nemedian answered impatiently, “Come on! If we secure the Heart, these and all other things shall be ours.”

Conan climbed over the sparkling rim. The level of the tower's top was some feet below the gemmed ledge. It was flat, composed of some dark blue substance, set with gold that caught the starlight, so that the whole looked like a wide sapphire flecked with shining gold-dust. Across from the point where they had entered there seemed to be a sort of chamber, built upon the roof. It was of the same silvery material as the walls of the tower, adorned with designs worked in smaller gems; its single door was of gold, its surface cut in scales, and crusted with jewels that gleamed like ice.

Conan cast a glance at the pulsing ocean of lights which spread far below them, then glanced at Taurus. The Nemedian was drawing up his cord and coiling it. He showed Conan where the 77

hook had caught – a fraction of an inch of the point had sunk under a great blazing jewel on the inner side of the rim.

"Luck was with us again," he muttered. "One would think that our combined weight would have torn that stone out. Follow me; the real risks of the venture begin now. We are in the serpent's lair, and we know not where he lies hidden."

Like stalking tigers they crept across the darkly gleaming floor and halted outside the sparkling door. With a deft and cautious hand Taurus tried it. It gave without resistance, and the companions looked in, tensed for anything. Over the Nemedian's shoulder Conan had a glimpse of a glittering chamber, the walls, ceiling and floor of which were crusted with great white jewels which lighted it brightly, and which seemed its only illumination. It seemed empty of life.

"Before we cut off our last retreat," hissed Taurus, "go you to the rim and look over on all sides; if you see any soldiers moving in the gardens, or anything suspicious, return and tell me.

I will await you within this chamber."

Conan saw scant reason in this, and a faint suspicion of his companion touched his wary soul, but he did as Taurus requested. As he turned away, the Nemedian slipt inside the door and drew it shut behind him. Conan crept about the rim of the tower, returning to his starting-point without having seen any suspicious movement in the vaguely waving sea of leaves below. He turned toward the door—suddenly from within the chamber there sounded a

strangled cry.

The Cimmerian leaped forward, electrified – the gleaming door swung open and Taurus stood framed in the cold blaze behind him. He swayed and his lips parted, but only a dry rattle burst from his throat. Catching at the golden door for support, he lurched out upon the roof, then fell headlong, clutching at his throat. The door swung to behind him.

Conan, crouching like a panther at bay, saw nothing in the room behind the stricken Nemedian, in the brief instant the door was partly open – unless it was not a trick of the light which made it seem as if a shadow darted across the gleaming floor. Nothing followed Taurus out on the roof, and Conan bent above the man.

The Nemedian stared up with dilated, glazing eyes, that somehow held a terrible bewilderment.

His hands clawed at his throat, his lips slobbered and gurgled; then suddenly he stiffened, and the astounded Cimmerian knew that he was dead. And he felt that Taurus had died without knowing what manner of death had stricken him. Conan glared bewilderedly at the cryptic golden door. In that empty room, with its glittering jeweled walls, death had come to the prince 78

of thieves as swiftly and mysteriously as he had dealt doom to the lions in the gardens below.

Gingerly the barbarian ran his hands over the man’s half-naked body, seeking a wound. But the only marks of violence were between his shoulders, high up near the base of his bull-neck –

three small wounds, which looked as if three nails had been driven deep in the flesh and withdrawn. The edges of these wounds were black, and a faint smell as of putrefaction was evident. Poisoned darts? thought Conan – but in that case the missiles should be still in the wounds.

Cautiously he stole toward the golden door, pushed it open, and looked inside. The chamber lay empty, bathed in the cold, pulsing glow of the myriad jewels. In the very center of the ceiling he idly noted a curious design – a black eight-sided pattern, in the center of which four gems glittered with a red flame unlike the white blaze of the other jewels. Across the room there was another door, like the one in which he stood, except that it was not carved in

the scale pattern. Was it from that door that death had come? – and having struck down its victim, had it retreated by the same way?

Closing the door behind him, the Cimmerian advanced into the chamber. His bare feet made no sound on the crystal floor. There were no chairs or tables in the chamber, only three or four silken couches, embroidered with gold and worked in strange serpentine designs, and several silver-bound mahogany chests. Some were sealed with heavy golden locks; others lay open, their carven lids thrown back, revealing heaps of jewels in a careless riot of splendor to the Cimmerian's astounded eyes. Conan swore beneath his breath; already he had looked upon more wealth that night than he had ever dreamed existed in all the world, and he grew dizzy thinking of what must be the value of the jewel he sought.

He was in the center of the room now, going stooped forward, head thrust out warily, sword advanced, when again death struck at him soundlessly. A flying shadow that swept across the gleaming floor was his only warning, and his instinctive sidelong leap all that saved his life. He had a flashing glimpse of a hairy black horror that swung past him with a clashing of frothing fangs, and something splashed on his bare shoulder that burned like drops of liquid hell-fire.

Springing back, sword high, he saw the horror strike the floor, wheel and scuttle toward him with appalling speed – a gigantic black spider, such as men see only in nightmare dreams.

It was as large as a pig, and its eight thick hairy legs drove its ogreish body over the floor at headlong pace; its four evilly gleaming eyes shone with a horrible intelligence, and its fangs dripped venom that Conan knew, from the burning of his shoulder where only a few drops had splashed as the thing struck and missed, was laden with swift death. This was the killer that had dropped from its perch in the middle of the ceiling on a strand of its web, on the neck of the Nemedian. Fools that they were not to have suspected that the upper chambers would be 79

guarded as well as the lower!

These thoughts flashed briefly through Conan's mind as the monster rushed. He leaped high, and it passed beneath him, wheeled and charged back. This time he evaded its rush with a sidewise leap, and struck back like a cat. His sword severed one of the hairy legs, and again he barely saved himself as the

monstrosity swerved at him, fangs clicking fiendishly. But the creature did not press the pursuit; turning, it scuttled across the crystal floor and ran up the wall to the ceiling, where it crouched for an instant, glaring down at him with its fiendish red eyes.

Then without warning it launched itself through space, trailing a strand of slimy grayish stuff.

Conan stepped back to avoid the hurtling body – then ducked frantically, just in time to escape being snared by the flying web-rope. He saw the monster's intent and sprang toward the door, but it was quicker, and a sticky strand cast across the door made him a prisoner. He dared not try to cut it with his sword; he knew the stuff would cling to the blade, and before he could shake it loose, the fiend would be sinking its fangs into his back.

Then began a desperate game, the wits and quickness of the man matched against the fiendish craft and speed of the giant spider. It no longer scuttled across the floor in a direct charge, or swung its body through the air at him. It raced about the ceiling and the walls, seeking to snare him in the long loops of sticky gray web-strands, which it flung with a devilish accuracy. These strands were thick as ropes, and Conan knew that once they were coiled about him, his desperate strength would not be enough to tear him free before the monster struck.

All over the chamber went on that devil's dance, in utter silence except for the quick breathing of the man, the low scuff of his bare feet on the shining floor, the castanet rattle of the monstrosity's fangs. The gray strands lay in coils on the floor; they were looped along the walls; they overlaid the jewel-chests and silken couches, and hung in dusky festoons from the jeweled ceiling. Conan's steel-trap quickness of eye and muscle had kept him untouched, though the sticky loops had passed him so close they rasped his naked hide. He knew he could not always avoid them; he not only had to watch the strands swinging from the ceiling, but to keep his eye on the floor, lest he trip in the coils that lay there. Sooner or later a gummy loop would writhe about him, python-like, and then, wrapped like a cocoon, he would lie at the monster's mercy.

The spider raced across the chamber floor, the gray rope waving out behind it. Conan leaped high, clearing a couch – with a quick wheel the fiend ran up the wall, and the strand, leaping off the floor like a live thing, whipped about the Cimmerian's ankle. He caught himself on his hands as he fell, jerking frantically at the web which held him like a pliant vise, or the coil of a python. The hairy devil was racing down the wall to complete its capture.

Stung to frenzy, Conan caught up a jewel chest and hurled it with all his strength. It was a move the monster was not expecting. Full in the midst of the branching black legs the massive missile struck, smashing against the wall with a muffled sickening crunch. Blood and greenish slime spattered, 80

and the shattered mass fell with the burst gem-chest to the floor. The crushed black body lay among the flaming riot of jewels that spilled over it; the hairy legs moved aimlessly, the dying eyes glittered redly among the twinkling gems.

Conan glared about, but no other horror appeared, and he set himself to working free of the web. The substance clung tenaciously to his ankle and his hands, but at last he was free, and taking up his sword, he picked his way among the gray coils and loops to the inner door. What horrors lay within he did not know. The Cimmerian’s blood was up, and since he had come so far, and overcome so much peril, he was determined to go through to the grim finish of the adventure, whatever that might be. And he felt that the jewel he sought was not among the many so carelessly strewn about the gleaming chamber.

Stripping off the loops that fouled the inner door, he found that it, like the other, was not locked. He wondered if the soldiers below were still unaware of his presence. Well, he was high above their heads, and if tales were to be believed, they were used to strange noises in the tower above them – sinister sounds, and screams of agony and horror.

Yara was on his mind, and he was not altogether comfortable as he opened the golden door.

But he saw only a flight of silver steps leading down, dimly lighted by what means he could not ascertain. Down these he went silently, gripping his sword. He heard no sound, and came presently to an ivory door, set with blood stones. He listened, but no sound came from within; only thin wisps of smoke drifted lazily from beneath the door, bearing a curious exotic odor unfamiliar to the Cimmerian. Below him the silver stair wound down to vanish in the dimness, and up that shadowy well no sound floated; he had an eery feeling that he was alone in a tower occupied only by ghosts and phantoms.

III

Cautiously he pressed against the ivory door and it swung silently inward. On the shimmering threshold Conan stared like a wolf in strange surroundings, ready to fight or flee on the instant.

He was looking into a large chamber with a domed golden ceiling; the walls were of green jade, the floor of ivory, partly covered by thick rugs. Smoke and exotic scent of incense floated up from a brazier on a golden tripod, and behind it sat an idol on a sort of marble couch. Conan stared aghast; the image had the body of a man, naked, and green in color; but the head was one of nightmare and madness. Too large for the human body, it had no attributes of humanity.

Conan stared at the wide flaring ears, the curling proboscis, on either side of which stood white tusks tipped with round golden balls. The eyes were closed, as if in sleep.

This then, was the reason for the name, the Tower of the Elephant, for the head of the thing was much like that of the beasts described by the Shemitish wanderer. This was Yara’s god; where then should the gem be, but concealed in the idol, since the stone was called the Elephant’s Heart?

As Conan came forward, his eyes fixed on the motionless idol, the eyes of the thing opened suddenly! The Cimmerian froze in his tracks. It was no image – it was a living thing, and he was trapped in its chamber!

That he did not instantly explode in a burst of murderous frenzy is a fact that measures his horror, which paralyzed him where he stood. A civilized man in his position would have sought doubtful refuge in the conclusion that he was insane; it did not occur to the Cimmerian to doubt his senses. He knew he was face to face with a demon of the Elder World, and the realization robbed him of all his faculties except sight.

The trunk of the horror was lifted and quested about, the topaz eyes stared unseeingly, and Conan knew the monster was blind. With the thought came a thawing of his frozen nerves, and he began to back silently toward the door. But the creature heard. The sensitive trunk stretched toward him, and Conan’s horror froze him again when the being spoke, in a strange, stammering voice that never changed its key or timbre. The Cimmerian knew that those jaws were never built or intended for human speech.

“Who is here? Have you come to torture me again, Yara? Will you never be done? Oh, Yagkosha, is there no end to agony?”

Tears rolled from the sightless eyes, and Conan’s gaze strayed to the limbs stretched on the marble couch. And he knew the monster would not rise to attack him. He knew the marks of the rack, and the searing brand of the flame, and tough-souled as he was, he stood aghast at the ruined deformities which his reason told him had once been limbs as comely as his own. And suddenly all fear and repulsion went from him, to be replaced by a great pity. What this monster was, Conan could not know, but the evidences of its sufferings were so terrible and pathetic that a strange aching sadness came over the Cimmerian, he knew not why. He only felt that he was looking upon a cosmic tragedy, and he shrank with shame, as if the guilt of a whole race were laid upon him.

“I am not Yara,” he said. “I am only a thief. I will not harm you.”

“Come near that I may touch you,” the creature faltered, and Conan came near unfearingly, his sword hanging forgotten in his hand. The sensitive trunk came out and groped over his face and shoulders, as a blind man gropes, and its touch was light as a girl’s hand.

“You are not of Yara’s race of devils,” sighed the creature. “The clean, lean fierceness of the wastelands marks you. I know your people from of old, whom I knew by another name in the long, long ago when another world lifted its jeweled spires to the stars. There is blood on your fingers.”

“A spider in the chamber above and a lion in the garden,” muttered Conan.

“You have slain a man too, this night,” answered the other. “And there is death in the tower above. I feel; I know.”

“Aye,” muttered Conan. “The prince of all thieves lies there dead from the bite of a vermin.”

“So – and so!” the strange inhuman voice rose in a sort of low chant. “A slaying in the tavern and a slaying on the roof – I know; I feel. And the third will make the magic of which not even Yara dreams – oh, magic of deliverance, green gods of Yag!”

Again tears fell as the tortured body was rocked to and fro in the grip of varied emotions.

Conan looked on, bewildered.

Then the convulsions ceased; the soft, sightless eyes were turned toward the Cimmerian, the trunk beckoned.

“Oh man, listen,” said the strange being. “I am foul and monstrous to you, am I not? Nay, do not answer; I know. But you would seem as strange to me, could I see you. There are many worlds besides this earth, and life takes many shapes. I am neither god nor demon, but flesh and blood like yourself, though the substance differ in part, and the form be cast in different mold.

“I am very old, oh man of the waste countries; long and long ago I came to this planet with others of my world, from the green planet Yag, which circles for ever in the outer fringe of this universe. We swept through space on mighty wings that drove us through the cosmos quicker than light, because we had warred with the kings of Yag and were defeated and outcast. But we could never return, for on earth our wings withered from our shoulders. Here we abode apart from earthly life. We fought the strange and terrible forms of life which then walked the earth, so that we became feared, and were not molested in the dim jungles of the east, where we had our abode.

“We saw men grow from the ape and build the shining cities of Valusia, Kamelia, Commoria, and their sisters. We saw them reel before the thrusts of the heathen Atlanteans and Picts and Lemurians. We saw the oceans rise and engulf Atlantis and Lemuria, and the isles of the Picts, and the shining cities of civilization. We saw the survivors of Pictdom and Atlantis build their stone age empires, and go down to ruin, locked in bloody wars. We saw the Picts sink into abysmal savagery, the Atlanteans into apedom again. We saw new savages drift southward in conquering waves from the arctic circle to build a new civilization, with new kingdoms called Nemedia, and Koth, and Aquilonia and their sisters. We saw your people rise under a new name from the jungles of the apes that had been Atlanteans. We saw the descendants of the 83

Lemurians who had survived the cataclysm, rise again through savagery and ride westward, as Hyrkanians. And we saw this race of devils, survivors of the ancient civilization that was before Atlantis sank, come once more into culture and power – this accursed kingdom of Zamora.

“All this we saw, neither aiding nor hindering the immutable cosmic law, and one by one we died; for we of Yag are not immortal, though our lives are as the lives of planets and constellations. At last I alone was left, dreaming of old times among the ruined temples of jungle-lost Khitai, worshipped as a god by an ancient yellow-skinned race. Then came Yara, versed in dark knowledge handed down through the days of barbarism, since before Atlantis sank.

“First he sat at my feet and learned wisdom. But he was not satisfied with what I taught him, for it was white magic, and he wished evil lore, to enslave kings and glut a fiendish ambition. I would teach him none of the black secrets I had gained, through no wish of mine, through the eons.

“But his wisdom was deeper than I had guessed; with guile gotten among the dusky tombs of dark Stygia, he trapped me into divulging a secret I had not intended to bare; and turning my own power upon me, he enslaved me. Ah, gods of Yag, my cup has been bitter since that hour!

“He brought me up from the lost jungles of Khitai where the gray apes danced to the pipes of the yellow priests, and offerings of fruit and wine heaped my broken altars. No more was I a god to kindly jungle-folk – I was slave to a devil in human form.”

Again tears stole from the unseeing eyes.

“He pent me in this tower which at his command I built for him in a single night. By fire and rack he mastered me, and by strange unearthly tortures you would not understand. In agony I would long ago have taken my own life, if I could. But he kept me alive – mangled, blinded, and broken – to do his foul bidding. And for three hundred years I have done his bidding, from this marble couch, blackening my soul with cosmic sins, and staining my wisdom with crimes, because I had no other choice. Yet not all my ancient secrets has he wrested from me, and my last gift shall be the sorcery of the Blood and the Jewel.

“For I feel the end of time draw near. You are the hand of Fate. I beg of you, take the gem you will find on yonder altar.”

Conan turned to the gold and ivory altar indicated, and took up a great round jewel, clear as crimson crystal; and he knew that this was the Heart of the Elephant.

The Coming of Conan The Cimmerian

“Now for the great magic, the mighty magic, such as earth has not seen before, and shall not see again, through a million million of millenniums. By my life-blood I conjure it, by blood born on the green breast of Yag, dreaming far-poised in the great blue vastness of Space.

“Take your sword, man, and cut out my heart; then squeeze it so that the blood will flow over the red stone. Then go you down these stairs and enter the ebony chamber where Yara sits wrapped in lotus-dreams of evil. Speak his name and he will awaken. Then lay this gem before him, and say, ‘Yag-kosha gives you a last gift and a last enchantment.’ Then get you from the tower quickly; fear not, your way shall be made clear. The life of man is not the life of Yag, nor is human death the death of Yag. Let me be free of this cage of broken blind flesh, and I will once more be Yogah of Yag, morning-crowned and shining, with wings to fly, and feet to dance, and eyes to see, and hands to break.”

Uncertainly Conan approached, and Yag-kosha, or Yogah, as if sensing his uncertainty, indicated where he should strike. Conan set his teeth and drove the sword deep. Blood streamed over the blade and his hand, and the monster started convulsively, then lay back quite still. Sure that life had fled, at least life as he understood it, Conan set to work on his grisly task and quickly brought forth something that he felt must be the strange being’s heart, though it differed curiously from any he had ever seen. Holding the still pulsing organ over the blazing jewel, he pressed it with both hands, and a rain of blood fell on the stone. To his surprize, it did not run off, but soaked into the gem, as water is absorbed by a sponge.

Holding the jewel gingerly, he went out of the fantastic chamber and came upon the silver steps. He did not look back; he instinctively felt that some sort of transmutation was taking place in the body on the marble couch, and he further felt that it was of a sort not to be witnessed by human eyes.

He closed the ivory door behind him and without hesitation descended the silver steps. It did not occur to him to ignore the instructions given him. He halted at an ebony door, in the center of which was a grinning silver skull, and pushed it open. He looked into a chamber of ebony and jet, and saw, on a black silken couch, a tall, spare form reclining. Yara the priest and sorcerer lay before him, his eyes open and dilated with the fumes of the yellow lotus, far-staring, as if fixed on gulfs and nighted abysses beyond human ken.

“Yara!” said Conan, like a judge pronouncing doom. “Awaken!”

The eyes cleared instantly and became cold and cruel as a vulture's. The tall silken-clad form lifted erect, and towered gauntly above the Cimmerian.

"Dog!" His hiss was like the voice of a cobra. "What do you here?"

Conan laid the jewel on the great ebony table.

"He who sent this gem bade me say, 'Yag-kosha gives a last gift and a last enchantment.'"

Yara recoiled, his dark face ashy. The jewel was no longer crystal-clear; its murky depths pulsed and throbbed, and curious smoky waves of changing color passed over its smooth surface. As if drawn hypnotically, Yara bent over the table and gripped the gem in his hands, staring into its shadowed depths, as if it were a magnet to draw the shuddering soul from his body. And as Conan looked, he thought that his eyes must be playing him tricks. For when Yara had risen up from his couch, the priest had seemed gigantically tall; yet now he saw that Yara's head would scarcely come to his shoulder. He blinked, puzzled, and for the first time that night, doubted his own senses. Then with a shock he realized that the priest was shrinking in stature – was growing smaller before his very gaze.

With a detached feeling he watched, as a man might watch a play; immersed in a feeling of overpowering unreality, the Cimmerian was no longer sure of his own identity; he only knew that he was looking upon the external evidences of the unseen play of vast Outer forces, beyond his understanding.

Now Yara was no bigger than a child; now like an infant he sprawled on the table, still grasping the jewel. And now the sorcerer suddenly realized his fate, and he sprang up, releasing the gem. But still he dwindled, and Conan saw a tiny, pigmy figure rushing wildly about the ebony table-top, waving tiny arms and shrieking in a voice that was like the squeak of an insect.

Now he had shrunk until the great jewel towered above him like a hill, and Conan saw him cover his eyes with his hands, as if to shield them from the glare, as he staggered about like a madman. Conan sensed that some unseen magnetic force was pulling Yara to the gem. Thrice he raced wildly about it in a narrowing circle, thrice he strove to turn and run out across the table; then

with a scream that echoed faintly in the ears of the watcher, the priest threw up his arms and ran straight toward the blazing globe.

Bending close, Conan saw Yara clamber up the smooth, curving surface, impossibly, like a man climbing a glass mountain. Now the priest stood on the top, still with tossing arms, invoking what grisly names only the gods know. And suddenly he sank into the very heart of the jewel, as a man sinks into a sea, and Conan saw the smoky waves close over his head. Now he saw him in the crimson heart of the jewel, once more crystal-clear, as a man sees a scene far away, tiny with great distance. And into the heart came a green, shining winged figure with the body of a man and the head of an elephant – no longer blind or crippled. Yara threw up his arms and fled as a madman flees, and on his heels came the avenger. Then, like the bursting of 86

a bubble, the great jewel vanished in a rainbow burst of iridescent gleams, and the ebony tabletop lay bare and deserted – as bare, Conan somehow knew, as the marble couch in the chamber above, where the body of that strange transcosmic being called Yag-kosha and Yogah had lain.

The Cimmerian turned and fled from the chamber, down the silver stairs. So mazed was he that it did not occur to him to escape from the tower by the way he had entered it. Down that winding, shadowy silver well he ran, and came into a large chamber at the foot of the gleaming stairs. There he halted for an instant; he had come into the room of the soldiers. He saw the glitter of their silver corselets, the sheen of their jeweled sword-hilts. They sat slumped at the banquet board, their dusky plumes waving somberly above their drooping helmeted heads; they lay among their dice and fallen goblets on the wine-stained lapis-lazuli floor. And he knew that they were dead. The promise had been made, the word kept; whether sorcery or magic or the falling shadow of great green wings had stilled the revelry, Conan could not know, but his way had been made clear. And a silver door stood open, framed in the whiteness of dawn.

Into the waving green gardens came the Cimmerian, and as the dawn wind blew upon him with the cool fragrance of luxuriant growths, he started like a man waking from a dream. He turned back uncertainly, to stare at the cryptic tower he had just left. Was he bewitched and enchanted? Had he dreamed all that had seemed to have passed? As he looked he saw the gleaming tower sway against the crimson dawn, its jewel-crusted rim sparkling in the growing light, and crash into shining shards.

The Coming of Conan The Cimmerian

The Scarlet Citadel

The Scarlet Citadel

I

They trapped the Lion on Shamu's plain;

They weighted his limbs with an iron chain;

They cried aloud in the trumpet-blast,

They cried, "The Lion is caged at last!"

Woe to the cities of river and plain

If ever the Lion stalks again!

– Old Ballad.

The roar of battle had died away; the shout of victory mingled with the cries of the dying. Like gay-hued leaves after an autumn storm, the fallen littered the plain; the sinking sun shimmered on burnished helmets, gilt-worked mail, silver breastplates, broken swords and the heavy regal folds of silken standards, overthrown in pools of curdling crimson. In silent heaps lay war-horses and their steel-clad riders, flowing manes and blowing plumes stained alike in the red tide. About them and among them, like the drift of a storm, were strewn slashed and trampled bodies in steel caps and leather jerkins – archers and pikemen.

The oliphants sounded a fanfare of triumph all over the plain, and the hoofs of the victors crunched in the breasts of the vanquished as all the straggling, shining lines converged inward like the spokes of a glittering wheel, to the spot where the last survivor still waged unequal strife.

That day Conan, king of Aquilonia, had seen the pick of his chivalry cut to pieces, smashed and hammered to bits, and swept into eternity. With five thousand knights he had crossed the south-eastern border of Aquilonia and ridden into the grassy meadowlands of Ophir, to find his former ally, King Amalrus of Ophir, drawn up against him with the hosts of Strabonus, king of

Koth. Too late he had seen the trap. All that a man might do he had done with his five thousand cavalrymen against the thirty thousand knights, archers and spearmen of the conspirators.

Without bowmen or infantry, he had hurled his armored horsemen against the oncoming host, had seen the knights of his foes in their shining mail go down before his lances, had torn the opposing center to bits, driving the riven ranks headlong before him, only to find himself caught in a vise as the untouched wings closed in. Strabonus' Shemitish bowmen had wrought havoc among his knights, feathering them with shafts that found every crevice in their armor, shooting down the horses, the Kothian pikemen rushing in to spear the fallen riders. The mailed lancers of the routed center had re-formed, reinforced by the riders from the wings, and had charged again and again, sweeping the field by sheer weight of numbers.

The Aquilonians had not fled; they had died on the field, and of the five thousand knights who had followed Conan southward, not one left the field alive. And now the king himself stood at bay among the slashed bodies of his house-troops, his back against a heap of dead horses and men. Ophirean knights in gilded mail leaped their horses over mounds of corpses to slash at the solitary figure; squat Shemites with blue-black beards, and dark-faced Kothian knights ringed him on foot. The clangor of steel rose deafeningly; the black-mailed figure of the western king loomed among his swarming foes, dealing blows like a butcher wielding a great cleaver.

Riderless horses raced down the field; about his iron-clad feet grew a ring of mangled corpses.

His attackers drew back from his desperate savagery, panting and livid.

Now through the yelling, cursing lines rode the lords of the conquerors – Strabonus, with his broad dark face and crafty eyes; Amalrus, slender, fastidious, treacherous, dangerous as a cobra; and the lean vulture Tsotha-lanti, clad only in silken robes, his great black eyes glittering from a face that was like that of a bird of prey. Of this Kothian wizard dark tales were told; tousle-headed women in northern and western villages frightened children with his name, and rebellious slaves were brought to abased submission quicker than by the lash, with threat of being sold to him. Men said that he had a whole library of dark works bound in skin flayed from living human

victims, and that in nameless pits below the hill whereon his palace sat, he trafficked with the powers of darkness, trading screaming girl slaves for unholy secrets. He was the real ruler of Koth.

Now he grinned bleakly as the kings reined back a safe distance from the grim iron-clad figure looming among the dead. Before the savage blue eyes blazing murderously from beneath the crested, dented helmet, the boldest shrank. Conan's dark scarred face was darker yet with passion; his black armor was hacked to tatters and splashed with blood; his great sword red to the cross-piece. In this stress all the veneer of civilization had faded; it was a barbarian who faced his conquerors. Conan was a Cimmerian by birth, one of those fierce moody hillmen who dwelt in their gloomy, cloudy land in the north. His saga, which had led him to the throne of Aquilonia, was the basis of a whole cycle of hero-tales.

So now the kings kept their distance, and Strabonus called on his Shemitish archers to loose their arrows at his foe from a distance; his captains had fallen like ripe grain before the Cimmerian's broadsword, and Strabonus, penurious of his knights as of his coins, was frothing with fury. But Tsotha shook his head.

"Take him alive."

"Easy to say!" snarled Strabonus, uneasy lest in some way the black-mailed giant might hew a path to them through the spears. "Who can take a man-eating tiger alive? By Ishtar, his heel is on the necks of my finest swordsmen! It took seven years and stacks of gold to train each, and there they lie, so much kite's meat. Arrows, I say!"

"Again, nay!" snapped Tsotha, swinging down from his horse. He laughed coldly. "Have you not learned by this time that my brain is mightier than any sword?"

He passed through the lines of the pikemen, and the giants in their steel caps and mail brigandines shrank back fearfully, lest they so much as touch the skirts of his robe. Nor were the plumed knights slower in making room for him. He stepped over the corpses and came face to face with the grim king. The hosts watched in tense silence, holding their breath. The black-armored figure loomed in terrible menace over the lean, silk-robed shape, the notched,

dripping sword hovering on high.

“I offer you life, Conan,” said Tsotha, a cruel mirth bubbling at the back of his voice.

“I give you death, wizard,” snarled the king, and backed by iron muscles and ferocious hate the great sword swung in a stroke meant to shear Tsotha’s lean torso in half. But even as the hosts cried out, the wizard stepped in, too quick for the eye to follow, and apparently merely laid an open hand on Conan’s left forearm, from the ridged muscles of which the mail had been hacked away. The whistling blade veered from its arc and the mailed giant crashed heavily to earth, to lie motionless. Tsotha laughed silently.

“Take him up and fear not; the lion’s fangs are drawn.”

The kings reined in and gazed in awe at the fallen lion. Conan lay stiffly, like a dead man, but his eyes glared up at them, wide open, and blazing with helpless fury.

“What have you done to him?” asked Amalrus uneasily.

Tsotha displayed a broad ring of curious design on his finger. He pressed his fingers together and on the inner side of the ring a tiny steel fang darted out like a snake’s tongue.

“It is steeped in the juice of the purple lotus which grows in the ghost-haunted swamps of southern Stygia,” said the magician. “Its touch produces temporary paralysis. Put him in chains and lay him in a chariot. The sun sets and it is time we were on the road for Khorshemish.”

Strabonus turned to his general Arbanus.

“We return to Khorshemish with the wounded. Only a troop of the royal cavalry will accompany us. Your orders are to march at dawn to the Aquilonian border, and invest the city of Shamar. The Ophireans will supply you with food along the march. We will rejoin you as soon as possible, with reinforcements.”

So the host, with its steel-sheathed knights, its pikemen and archers and

camp-servants, went into camp in the meadowlands near the battlefield. And through the starry night the two kings and the sorcerer who was greater than any king rode to the capital of Strabonus, in the midst of the glittering palace troop, and accompanied by a long line of chariots, loaded with the wounded. In one of these chariots lay Conan, king of Aquilonia, weighted with chains, the tang of defeat in his mouth, the blind fury of a trapped tiger in his soul.

The poison which had frozen his mighty limbs to helplessness had not paralyzed his brain. As the chariot in which he lay rumbled over the meadowlands, his mind revolved maddeningly about his defeat. Amalrus had sent an emissary imploring aid against Strabonus, who, he said, was ravaging his western domain, which lay like a tapering wedge between the border of Aquilonia and the vast southern kingdom of Koth. He asked only a thousand horsemen and the presence of Conan, to hearten his demoralized subjects. Conan now mentally blasphemed. In his generosity he had come with five times the number the treacherous monarch had asked. In good faith he had ridden into Ophir, and had been confronted by the supposed rivals allied against him. It spoke significantly of his prowess that they had brought up a whole host to trap him and his five thousand.

A red cloud veiled his vision; his veins swelled with fury and in his temples a pulse throbbed maddeningly. In all his life he had never known greater and more helpless wrath. In swift-moving scenes the pageant of his life passed fleetingly before his mental eye – a panorama wherein moved shadowy figures which were himself, in many guises and conditions – a skin-clad barbarian; a mercenary swordsman in horned helmet and scale-mail corselet; a corsair in a dragon-prowed galley that trailed a crimson wake of blood and pillage along southern coasts; a captain of hosts in burnished steel, on a rearing black charger; a king on a golden throne with the lion banner flowing above, and throngs of gay-hued courtiers and ladies on their knees. But always the jouncing and rumbling of the chariot brought his thoughts back to revolve with maddening monotony about the treachery of Amalrus and the sorcery of Tsotha. The veins nearly burst in his temples and cries of the wounded in the chariots filled him with ferocious satisfaction.

Before midnight they crossed the Ophirean border and at dawn the spires of Khorshemish stood up gleaming and rose-tinted on the south-eastern horizon, the slim towers overawed by the grim scarlet citadel that at a distance was

like a splash of bright blood in the sky. That was the castle of Tsotha. Only one narrow street, paved with marble and guarded by heavy iron gates, led up to it, where it crowned the hill dominating the city. The sides of that hill were too sheer to be climbed elsewhere. From the walls of the citadel one could look down on the broad white streets of the city, on minaretted mosques, shops, temples, mansions, and markets. One could look down, too, on the palaces of the king, set in broad gardens, high-walled, luxurious riots of fruit trees and blossoms, through which artificial streams murmured, and silvery fountains rippled incessantly. Over all brooded the citadel, like a condor stooping above its prey, intent on its own dark meditations.

The mighty gates between the huge towers of the outer wall clanged open, and the king rode into his capital between lines of glittering spearmen, while fifty trumpets pealed salute. But no throngs swarmed the white-paved streets to fling roses before the conqueror's hoofs. Strabonus had raced ahead of news of the battle, and the people, just rousing to the occupations of the day, gaped to see their king returning with a small retinue, and were in doubt as to whether it portended victory or defeat.

Conan, life sluggishly moving in his veins again, craned his neck from the chariot floor to view the wonders of this city which men called the Queen of the South. He had thought to ride some day through these golden-chased gates at the head of his steel-clad squadrons, with the great lion banner flowing over his helmeted head. Instead he entered in chains, stripped of his armor, and thrown like a captive slave on the bronze floor of his conqueror's chariot. A wayward devilish mirth of mockery rose above his fury, but to the nervous soldiers who drove the chariot his laughter sounded like the muttering of a rousing lion.

II

Gleaming shell of an outworn lie; fable of Right divine –

You gained your crowns by heritage, but Blood was the price of mine.

The throne that I won by blood and sweat, by Crom, I will not sell For promise of valleys filled with gold, or threat of the Halls of Hell!

– The Road of Kings.

In the citadel, in a chamber with a domed ceiling of carven jet, and the fretted arches of doorways glimmering with strange dark jewels, a strange conclave came to 92

pass. Conan of Aquilonia, blood from unbandaged wounds caking his huge limbs, faced his captors. On either side of him stood a dozen black giants, grasping their long-shafted axes. In front of him stood Tsotha, and on divans lounged Strabonus and Amalrus in their silks and gold, gleaming with jewels, naked slave-boys beside them pouring wine into cups carved of a single sapphire. In strong contrast stood Conan, grim, blood-stained, naked but for a loin-cloth, shackles on his mighty limbs, his blue eyes blazing beneath the tangled black mane which fell over his low broad forehead. He dominated the scene, turning to tinsel the pomp of the conquerors by the sheer vitality of his elemental personality, and the kings in their pride and splendor were aware of it each in his secret heart, and were not at ease. Only Tsotha was not disturbed.

“Our desires are quickly spoken, king of Aquilonia,” said Tsotha. “It is our wish to extend our empire.”

“And so you want to swine my kingdom,” rasped Conan.

“What are you but an adventurer, seizing a crown to which you had no more claim than any other wandering barbarian?” parried Amalrus. “We are prepared to offer you suitable compensation –”

“Compensation!” It was a gust of deep laughter from Conan’s mighty chest. “The price of infamy and treachery! I am a barbarian, so I shall sell my kingdom and its people for life and your filthy gold? Ha! How did you come to your crown, you and that black-faced pig beside you? Your fathers did the fighting and the suffering, and handed their crowns to you on golden platters. What you inherited without lifting a finger – except to poison a few brothers – I fought for.

“You sit on satin and guzzle wine the people sweat for, and talk of divine rights of sovereignty

– bah! I climbed out of the abyss of naked barbarism to the throne and in that climb I spilt my blood as freely as I spilt that of others. If either of us has the right to rule men, by Crom, it is I!

How have you proved yourselves my superiors?

“I found Aquilonia in the grip of a pig like you – one who traced his genealogy for a thousand years. The land was torn with the wars of the

barons, and the people cried out under oppression and taxation. Today no Aquilonian noble dares maltreat the humblest of my subjects, and the taxes of the people are lighter than anywhere else in the world.

“What of you? Your brother, Amalrus, holds the eastern half of your kingdom, and defies you.

And you, Strabonus, your soldiers are even now besieging castles of a dozen or more rebellious barons. The people of both your kingdoms are crushed into the earth by tyrannous taxes and 93

levies. And you would loot mine – ha! Free my hands and I’ll varnish this floor with your brains!”

Tsotha grinned bleakly to see the rage of his kingly companions.

“All this, truthful though it be, is beside the point. Our plans are no concern of yours. Your responsibility is at an end when you sign this parchment, which is an abdication in favor of Prince Arpello of Pellia. We will give you arms and horse, and five thousand golden lunas, and escort you to the eastern frontier.”

“Setting me adrift where I was when I rode into Aquilonia to take service in her armies, except with the added burden of a traitor’s name!” Conan’s laugh was like the deep short bark of a timber wolf. “Arpello, eh? I’ve had suspicions of that butcher of Pellia. Can you not even steal and pillage frankly and honestly, but you must have an excuse, however thin? Arpello claims a trace of royal blood; so you use him as an excuse for theft, and a satrap to rule through. I’ll see you in hell first.”

“You’re a fool!” exclaimed Amalrus. “You are in our hands, and we can take both crown and life at our pleasure!”

Conan’s answer was neither kingly nor dignified, but characteristically instinctive in the man, whose barbaric nature had never been submerged in his adopted culture. He spat full in Amalrus’ eyes. The king of Ophir leaped up with a scream of outraged fury, groping for his slender sword. Drawing it, he rushed at the Cimmerian, but Tsotha intervened.

“Wait, your majesty; this man is *my* prisoner.”

“Aside, wizard!” shrieked Amalrus, maddened by the glare in the

Cimmerian’s blue eyes.

“Back, I say!” roared Tsotha, roused to awesome wrath. His lean hand came from his wide sleeve and cast a shower of dust into the Ophirean’s contorted face. Amalrus cried out and staggered back, clutching at his eyes, the sword falling from his hand. He dropped limply on the divan, while the Kothian guards looked on stolidly and King Strabonus hurriedly gulped another goblet of wine, holding it with hands that trembled. Amalrus lowered his hands and shook his head violently, intelligence slowly sifting back into his grey eyes.

“I went blind,” he growled. “What did you do to me, wizard?”

“Merely a gesture to convince you who was the real master,” snapped Tsotha, the mask of his formal pretense dropped, revealing the naked evil personality of the man. “Strabonus has learned his lesson – let you learn yours. It was but a dust I found in a Stygian tomb which I 94

flung into your eyes – if I brush out their sight again, I will leave you to grope in darkness for the rest of your life.”

Amalrus shrugged his shoulders, smiled whimsically and reached for a goblet, dissembling his fear and fury. A polished diplomat, he was quick to regain his poise. Tsotha turned to Conan, who had stood imperturbably during the episode. At the wizard’s gesture, the blacks laid hold of their prisoner and marched him behind Tsotha, who led the way out of the chamber through an arched doorway into a winding corridor, whose floor was of many-hued mosaics, whose walls were inlaid with gold tissue and silver chasing, and from whose fretted arched ceiling swung golden censers, filling the corridor with dreamy perfumed clouds. They turned down a smaller corridor, done in jet and black jade, gloomy and awful, which ended at a brass door, over whose arch a human skull grinned horrifically. At this door stood a fat repellent figure, dangling a bunch of keys – Tsotha’s chief eunuch, Shukeli, of whom grisly tales were whispered – a man with whom a bestial lust for torture took the place of normal human passions.

The brass door let onto a narrow stair that seemed to wind down into the very bowels of the hill on which the citadel stood. Down these stairs went the band, to halt at last at an iron door, the strength of which seemed unnecessary. Evidently it did not open on outer air, yet it was built as if to withstand the battering of mangonels and rams. Shukeli opened it, and as he swung back the ponderous portal, Conan noted the evident uneasiness among the black giants

who guarded him; nor did Shukeli seem altogether devoid of nervousness as he peered into the darkness beyond. Inside the great door there was a second barrier, composed of heavy steel bars. It was fastened by an ingenious bolt which had no lock and could be worked only from the outside; this bolt shot back, the grille slid into the wall. They passed through, into a broad corridor, the floor, walls and arched ceiling of which seemed to be cut out of solid stone. Conan knew he was far underground, even below the hill itself. The darkness pressed in on the guardsmen's torches like a sentient, animate thing.

They made the king fast to a ring in the stone wall. Above his head in a niche in the wall they placed a torch, so that he stood in a dim semicircle of light. The blacks were anxious to be gone; they muttered among themselves, and cast fearful glances at the darkness. Tsotha motioned them out, and they filed through the door in stumbling haste, as if fearing that the darkness might take tangible form and spring upon their backs. Tsotha turned toward Conan, and the king noticed uneasily that the wizard's eyes shone in the semi-darkness, and that his teeth much resembled the fangs of a wolf, gleaming whitely in the shadows.

"And so, farewell, barbarian," mocked the sorcerer. "I must ride to Shamar, and the siege. In ten days I will be in your palace in Tamar, with my warriors. What word from you shall I say to your women, before I flay their dainty skins for scrolls whereon to chronicle the triumphs of Tsotha-lanti?"

Conan answered with a searing Cimmerian curse that would have burst the eardrums of an ordinary man, and Tsotha laughed thinly and withdrew. Conan had a glimpse of his vulture-like figure through the thick-set bars, as he slid home the grate; then the heavy outer door clanged, and silence fell like a pall.

III

The Lion strode through the Halls of Hell;

Across his path grim shadows fell

Of many a mowing, nameless shape –

Monsters with dripping jaws agape.

The darkness shuddered with scream and yell

When the Lion stalked through the Halls of Hell.

– Old Ballad.

King Conan tested the ring in the wall and the chain that bound him. His limbs were free, but he knew that his shackles were beyond even his iron strength. The links of the chain were as thick as his thumb and were fastened to a band of steel about his waist, a band broad as his hand and half an inch thick. The sheer weight of his shackles would have slain a lesser man with exhaustion. The locks that held band and chain were massive affairs that a sledge-hammer could hardly have dinted. As for the ring, evidently it went clear through the wall and was clinched on the other side.

Conan cursed and panic surged through him as he glared into the darkness that pressed against the half-circle of light. All the superstitious dread of the barbarian slept in his soul, untouched by civilized logic. His primitive imagination peopled the subterranean darkness with grisly shapes. Besides, his reason told him that he had not been placed there merely for confinement.

His captors had no reason to spare him. He had been placed in these pits for a definite doom.

He cursed himself for his refusal of their offer, even while his stubborn manhood revolted at the thought, and he knew that were he taken forth and given another chance, his reply would be the same. He would not sell his subjects to the butcher. And yet it had been with no thought of any one’s gain but his own that he had seized the kingdom originally. Thus subtly does the instinct of sovereign responsibility enter even a red-handed plunderer sometimes.

Conan thought of Tsotha’s last abominable threat, and groaned in sick fury, knowing it was no idle boast. Men and women were to the wizard no more than the writhing insect is to the scientist. Soft white hands that had caressed him, red lips that had been pressed to his, dainty white bosoms that had quivered to his hot fierce kisses, to be stripped of their delicate skin, white as ivory and pink as young petals – from Conan’s lips burst a yell so frightful and inhuman in its mad fury that a listener would have stared in horror to

know that it came from a human throat.

The shuddering echoes made him start and brought back his own situation vividly to the king.

He glared fearsomely at the outer gloom, and thought of the grisly tales he had heard of Tsotha's necromantic cruelty, and it was with an icy sensation down his spine that he realized that these must be the very Halls of Horror named in shuddering legendry, the tunnels and dungeons wherein Tsotha performed horrible experiments with beings human, bestial, and, it was whispered, demoniac, tampering blasphemously with the naked basic elements of life itself. Rumor said that the mad poet Rinaldo had visited these pits, and been shown horrors by the wizard, and that the nameless monstrosities of which he hinted in his awful poem, *The Song of the Pit*, were no mere fantasies of a disordered brain. That brain had crashed to dust beneath Conan's battle-axe on the night the king had fought for his life with the assassins the mad rhymer had led into the betrayed palace, but the shuddersome words of that grisly song still rang in the king's ears as he stood there in his chains.

Even with the thought the Cimmerian was frozen by a soft rustling sound, blood-freezing in its implication. He tensed in an attitude of listening, painful in its intensity. An icy hand stroked his spine. It was the unmistakable sound of pliant scales slithering softly over stone. Cold sweat beaded his skin, as beyond the ring of dim light he saw a vague and colossal form, awful even in its indistinctness. It reared upright, swaying slightly, and yellow eyes burned icily on him from the shadows. Slowly a huge, hideous, wedge-shaped head took form before his dilated eyes, and from the darkness oozed, in flowing scaly coils, the ultimate horror of reptilian development.

It was a snake that dwarfed all Conan's previous ideas of snakes. Eighty feet it stretched from its pointed tail to its triangular head, which was bigger than that of a horse. In the dim light its scales glistened coldly, white as hoar-frost. Surely this reptile was one born and grown in darkness, yet its eyes were full of evil and sure sight. It looped its titan coils in front of the captive, and the great head on the arching neck swayed a matter of inches from his face. Its forked tongue almost brushed his lips as it darted in and out, and its fetid odor made his senses reel with nausea. The great yellow eyes burned into his, and Conan gave back the glare of a trapped wolf. He fought against the mad impulse to grasp the great arching neck in his tearing hands. Strong beyond the comprehension of civilized man, he had broken the neck of a python in a fiendish battle on the Stygian coast, in his corsair days. But this reptile was

venomous; he saw the great fangs, a foot long, curved like scimitars. From them dripped a colorless liquid that he instinctively knew was death. He might conceivably crush that wedge-shaped skull with 97

a desperate clenched fist, but he knew that at his first hint of movement, the monster would strike like lightning.

It was not because of any logical reasoning process that Conan remained motionless, since reason might have told him – since he was doomed anyway – to goad the snake into striking and get it over with; it was the blind black instinct of self-preservation that held him rigid as a statue blasted out of iron. Now the great barrel reared up and the head was poised high above his own, as the monster investigated the torch. A drop of venom fell on his naked thigh, and the feel of it was like a white-hot dagger driven into his flesh. Red jets of agony shot through Conan's brain, yet he held himself immovable; not by the twitching of a muscle or the flicker of an eyelash did he betray the pain of the hurt that left a scar he bore to the day of his death.

The serpent swayed above him, as if seeking to ascertain whether there were in truth life in this figure which stood so death-like still. Then suddenly, unexpectedly, the outer door, all but invisible in the shadows, clanged stridently. The serpent, suspicious as all its kind, whipped about with a quickness incredible for its bulk, and vanished with a long-drawn slithering down the corridor. The door swung open and remained open. The grille was withdrawn and a huge dark figure was framed in the glow of torches outside. The figure glided in, pulling the grille partly to behind it, leaving the bolt poised. As it moved into the light of the torch over Conan's head, the king saw that it was a gigantic black man, stark naked, bearing in one hand a huge sword and in the other a bunch of keys. The black spoke in a sea-coast dialect, and Conan replied; he had learned the jargon while a corsair on the coasts of Kush.

"Long have I wished to meet you, Amra," the black gave Conan the name – Amra, the Lion –

by which the Cimmerian had been known to the Kushites in his piratical days. The slave's woolly skull split in an animal-like grin, showing white tusks, but his eyes glinted redly in the torchlight. "I have dared much for this meeting! Look! The keys to your chains! I stole them from Shukeli. What will you give me for them?"

He dangled the keys in front of Conan’s eyes.

“Ten thousand golden lunas,” answered the king quickly, new hope surging fiercely in his breast.

“Not enough!” cried the black, a ferocious exultation shining on his ebon countenance. “Not enough for the risks I take. Tsotha’s pets might come out of the dark and eat me, and if Shukeli finds out I stole his keys, he’ll hang me up by my – well, what will you give me?”

“Fifteen thousand lunas and a palace in Poitain,” offered the king.

The black yelled and stamped in a frenzy of barbaric gratification.

“More!” he cried. “Offer me more! What will you give me?”

“You black dog!” A red mist of fury swept across Conan’s eyes. “Were I free I’d give you a broken back! Did Shukeli send you here to mock me?”

“Shukeli knows nothing of my coming, white man,” answered the black, craning his thick neck to peer into Conan’s savage eyes. “I know you from of old, since the days when I was a chief among a free people, before the Stygians took me and sold me into the north. Do you not remember the sack of Abombi, when your sea-wolves swarmed in? Before the palace of King Ajaga you slew a chief and a chief fled from you. It was my brother who died; it was I who fled. I demand of you a blood-price, Amra!”

“Free me and I’ll pay you your weight in gold pieces,” growled Conan.

The red eyes glittered, the white teeth flashed wolfishly in the torchlight.

“Aye, you white dog, you are like all your race; but to a black man gold can never pay for blood. The price I ask is – your head!”

The last word was a maniacal shriek that sent the echoes shivering. Conan tensed, unconsciously straining against his shackles in his abhorrence of dying like a sheep; then he was frozen by a greater horror. Over the black’s shoulder he saw a vague horrific form swaying in the darkness.

“Tsotha will never know!” laughed the black fiendishly, too engrossed in his

gloating triumph to take heed of anything else, too drunk with hate to know that Death swayed behind his shoulder. “He will not come into the vaults until the demons have torn your bones from their chains. I will have your head, Amra!”

He braced his knotted legs like ebon columns and swung up the massive sword in both hands, his great black muscles rolling and cracking in the torchlight. And at that instant the titanic shadow behind him darted down and out, and the wedge-shaped head smote with an impact that re-echoed down the tunnels. Not a sound came from the thick blubbery lips that flew wide in fleeting agony. With the thud of the stroke, Conan saw the life go out of the wide black eyes with the suddenness of a candle blown out. The blow knocked the great black body clear across the corridor and horribly the gigantic sinuous shape whipped around it in glistening coils that hid it from view, and the snap and splintering of bones came plainly to Conan’s ears. Then something made his heart leap madly. The sword and the keys had flown from the black’s hands to crash and jangle on the stone – and the keys lay almost at the king’s feet.

He tried to bend to them, but the chain was too short; almost suffocated by the mad pounding 99

of his heart, he slipped one foot from its sandal, and gripped them with his toes; drawing his foot up, he grasped them fiercely, barely stifling the yell of ferocious exultation that rose instinctively to his lips.

An instant’s fumbling with the huge locks and he was free. He caught up the fallen sword and glared about. Only empty darkness met his eyes, into which the serpent had dragged a mangled, tattered object that only faintly resembled a human body. Conan turned to the open door. A few quick strides brought him to the threshold – a squeal of high-pitched laughter shrilled through the vaults, and the grille shot home under his very fingers, the bolt crashed down. Through the bars peered a face like a fiendishly mocking carven gargoyle – Shukeli the eunuch, who had followed his stolen keys. Surely he did not, in his gloating, see the sword in the prisoner’s hand. With a terrible curse Conan struck as a cobra strikes; the great blade hissed between the bars and Shukeli’s laughter broke in a death-scream. The fat eunuch bent at the middle, as if bowing to his killer, and crumpled like tallow, his pudgy hands clutching vainly at his spilling entrails.

Conan snarled in savage satisfaction; but he was still a prisoner. His keys

were futile against the bolt which could be worked only from the outside. His experienced touch told him the bars were hard as the sword; an attempt to hew his way to freedom would only splinter his one weapon. Yet he found dents on those adamantine bars, like the marks of incredible fangs, and wondered with an involuntary shudder what nameless monsters had so terribly assailed the barriers. Regardless, there was but one thing for him to do, and that was to seek some other outlet. Taking the torch from the niche, he set off down the corridor, sword in hand. He saw no sign of the serpent or its victim, only a great smear of blood on the stone floor.

Darkness stalked on noiseless feet about him, scarcely driven back by his flickering torch. On either hand he saw dark openings, but he kept to the main corridor, watching the floor ahead of him carefully, lest he fall into some pit. And suddenly he heard the sound of a woman, weeping piteously. Another of Tsotha's victims, he thought, cursing the wizard anew, and turning aside, followed the sound down a smaller tunnel, dank and damp.

The weeping grew nearer as he advanced, and lifting his torch he made out a vague shape in the shadows. Stepping closer, he halted in sudden horror at the amorphic bulk which sprawled before him. Its unstable outlines somewhat suggested an octopus, but its malformed tentacles were too short for its size, and its substance was a quaking, jelly-like stuff which made him physically sick to look at. From among this loathsome gelid mass reared up a frog-like head, and he was frozen with nauseated horror to realize that the sound of weeping was coming from those obscene blubbery lips. The noise changed to an abominable high-pitched tittering as the great unstable eyes of the monstrosity rested on him, and it hitched its quaking bulk toward him. He backed away and fled up the tunnel, not trusting his sword. The creature might be composed of terrestrial matter, but it shook his very soul to look upon it, and he doubted the power of man-made weapons to harm it. For a short distance he heard it flopping and 100

floundering after him, screaming with horrible laughter. The unmistakably human note in its mirth almost staggered his reason. It was exactly such laughter as he had heard bubble obscenely from the fat lips of the salacious women of Shadizar, City of Wickedness, when captive girls were stripped naked on the public auction block. By what hellish arts had Tsotha brought this unnatural being into life? Conan felt vaguely that he had looked on blasphemy against the eternal laws of nature.

He ran toward the main corridor, but before he reached it he crossed a sort of small square chamber, where two tunnels crossed. As he reached this chamber, he was flashingly aware of some small squat bulk on the floor ahead of him; then before he could check his flight or swerve aside, his foot struck something yielding that squalled shrilly, and he was precipitated headlong, the torch flying from his hand and being extinguished as it struck the stone floor.

Half stunned by his fall, Conan rose and groped in the darkness. His sense of direction was confused, and he was unable to decide in which direction lay the main corridor. He did not look for the torch, as he had no means of rekindling it. His groping hands found the openings of the tunnels, and he chose one at random. How long he traversed it in utter darkness, he never knew, but suddenly his barbarian's instinct of near peril halted him short.

He had the same feeling he had had when standing on the brink of great precipices in the darkness. Dropping to all fours, he edged forward, and presently his outflung hand encountered the edge of a well, into which the tunnel floor dropped abruptly. As far down as he could reach the sides fell away sheerly, dank and slimy to his touch. He stretched out an arm in the darkness and could barely touch the opposite edge with the point of his sword. He could leap across it, then, but there was no point in that. He had taken the wrong tunnel and the main corridor lay somewhere behind him.

Even as he thought this, he felt a faint movement of air; a shadowy wind, rising from the well, stirred his black mane. Conan's skin crawled. He tried to tell himself that this well connected somehow with the outer world, but his instincts told him it was a thing unnatural. He was not merely inside the hill; he was below it, far below the level of the city streets. How then could an outer wind find its way into the pits and blow up from *below* ? A faint throbbing pulsed on that ghostly wind, like drums beating, far, far below. A strong shudder shook the king of Aquilonia.

He rose to his feet and backed away, and as he did *something* floated up out of the well. What it was, Conan did not know. He could see nothing in the darkness, but he distinctly felt a presence – an invisible, intangible intelligence which hovered malignly near him. Turning, he fled the way he had come. Far ahead he saw a tiny red spark. He headed for it, and long before he thought to have reached it, he caromed headlong into a solid wall, and saw the spark at his feet. It was his torch, the flame extinguished, but the end a glowing coal. Carefully he took it up and blew upon it, fanning it into flame again. He gave a sigh as the tiny blaze leaped up. He was back in the chamber where the tunnels crossed, and his sense of direction came back.

He located the tunnel by which he had left the main corridor, and even as he started toward it, his torch flame flickered wildly as if blown upon by unseen lips. Again he felt a presence, and he lifted his torch, glaring about.

He saw nothing; yet he sensed, somehow, an invisible, bodiless thing that hovered in the air, dripping slimily and mouthing obscenities that he could not hear but was in some instinctive way aware of. He swung viciously with his sword and it felt as if he were cleaving cobwebs. A cold horror shook him then, and he fled down the tunnel, feeling a foul burning breath on his naked back as he ran.

But when he came out into the broad corridor, he was no longer aware of any presence, visible or invisible. Down it he went, momentarily expecting fanged and taloned fiends to leap at him from the darkness. The tunnels were not silent. From the bowels of the earth in all directions came sounds that did not belong in a sane world. There were titterings, squeals of demoniac mirth, long shuddering howls, and once the unmistakable squalling laughter of a hyena ended awfully in human words of shrieking blasphemy. He heard the pad of stealthy feet, and in the mouths of the tunnels caught glimpses of shadowy forms, monstrous and abnormal in outline.

It was as if he had wandered into hell – a hell of Tsotha-lanti's making. But the shadowy things did not come into the great corridor, though he distinctly heard the greedy sucking-in of slavering lips, and felt the burning glare of hungry eyes. And presently he knew why. A slithering sound behind him electrified him, and he leaped to the darkness of a near-by tunnel, shaking out his torch. Down the corridor he heard the great serpent crawling, sluggish from its recent grisly meal. From his very side something whimpered in fear and slunk away in the darkness. Evidently the main corridor was the great snake's hunting-ground and the other monsters gave it room.

To Conan the serpent was the least horror of them; he almost felt a kinship with it when he remembered the weeping, tittering obscenity, and the dripping, mouthing thing that came out of the well. At least it was of earthly matter; it was a crawling death, but it threatened only physical extinction, whereas these other horrors menaced mind and soul as well.

After it had passed on down the corridor he followed, at what he hoped was a safe distance, blowing his torch into flame again. He had not gone far when

he heard a low moan that seemed to emanate from the black entrance of a tunnel near by. Caution warned him on, but curiosity drove him to the tunnel, holding high the torch that was now little more than a stump. He was braced for the sight of anything, yet what he saw was what he had least expected. He was looking into a broad cell, and a space of this was caged off with closely set bars extending from floor to ceiling, set firmly in the stone. Within these bars lay a figure, which, as he approached, he saw was either a man, or the exact likeness of a man, twined and bound about with the tendrils of a thick vine which seemed to grow through the solid stone of the floor. It was 102

covered with strangely pointed leaves and crimson blossoms – not the satiny red of natural petals, but a livid, unnatural crimson, like a perversity of flower-life. Its clinging, pliant branches wound about the man's naked body and limbs, seeming to caress his shrinking flesh with lustful avid kisses. One great blossom hovered exactly over his mouth. A low bestial moaning drooled from the loose lips; the head rolled as if in unbearable agony, and the eyes looked full at Conan. But there was no light of intelligence in them; they were blank, glassy, the eyes of an idiot.

Now the great crimson blossom dipped and pressed its petals over the writhing lips. The limbs of the wretch twisted in anguish; the tendrils of the plant quivered as if in ecstasy, vibrating their full snaky lengths. Waves of changing hues surged over them; their color grew deeper, more venomous.

Conan did not understand what he saw, but he knew that he looked on Horror of some kind.

Man or demon, the suffering of the captive touched Conan's wayward and impulsive heart. He sought for entrance and found a grille-like door in the bars, fastened with a heavy lock, for which he found a key among the keys he carried, and entered. Instantly the petals of the livid blossoms spread like the hood of a cobra, the tendrils reared menacingly and the whole plant shook and swayed toward him. Here was no blind growth of natural vegetation. Conan sensed a malignant intelligence; the plant could see him, and he felt its hate emanate from it in almost tangible waves. Stepping warily nearer, he marked the root-stem, a repulsively supple stalk thicker than his thigh, and even as the long tendrils arched toward him with a rattle of leaves and hiss, he swung his sword and cut through the stem with a single stroke.

Instantly the wretch in its clutches was thrown violently aside as the great vine lashed and knotted like a beheaded serpent, rolling into a huge irregular

ball. The tendrils thrashed and writhed, the leaves shook and rattled like castanets, and the petals opened and closed convulsively; then the whole length straightened out limply, the vivid colors paled and dimmed, a reeking white liquid oozed from the severed stump.

Conan stared, spellbound; then a sound brought him round, sword lifted. The freed man was on his feet, surveying him. Conan gaped in wonder. No longer were the eyes in the worn face expressionless. Dark and meditative, they were alive with intelligence, and the expression of imbecility had dropped from the face like a mask. The head was narrow and well-formed, with a high splendid forehead. The whole build of the man was aristocratic, evident no less in his tall slender frame than in his small trim feet and hands. His first words were strange and startling.

“What year is this?” he asked, speaking Kothic.

“Today is the tenth day of the month Yuluk, of the year of the Gazelle,” answered Conan.

“Yagkoolan Ishtar!” murmured the stranger. “Ten years!” He drew a hand across his brow, shaking his head as if to clear his brain of cobwebs. “All is dim yet. After a ten-year emptiness, the mind can not be expected to begin functioning clearly at once. Who are you?”

“Conan, once of Cimmeria. Now king of Aquilonia.”

The other’s eyes showed surprize.

“Indeed? And Namedides?”

“I strangled him on his throne the night I took the royal city,” answered Conan.

A certain naivete in the king’s reply twitched the stranger’s lips.

“Pardon, your majesty. I should have thanked you for the service you have done me. I am like a man woken suddenly from sleep deeper than death and shot with nightmares of agony more fierce than hell, but I understand that you delivered me. Tell me – why did you cut the stem of the plant Yothga instead of tearing it up by the roots?”

“Because I learned long ago to avoid touching with my flesh that which I do not understand,”

answered the Cimmerian.

“Well for you,” said the stranger. “Had you been able to tear it up, you might have found things clinging to the roots against which not even your sword would prevail. Yothga’s roots are set in hell.”

“But who are you?” demanded Conan.

“Men called me Pelias.”

“What!” cried the king. “Pelias the sorcerer, Tsotha-lanti’s rival, who vanished from the earth ten years ago?”

“Not entirely from the earth,” answered Pelias with a wry smile. “Tsotha preferred to keep me alive, in shackles more grim than rusted iron. He pent me in here with this devil-flower whose seeds drifted down through the black cosmos from Yag the Accursed, and found fertile field only in the maggot-writhing corruption that seethes on the floors of hell.

“I could not remember my sorcery and the words and symbols of my power, with that cursed thing gripping me and drinking my soul with its loathsome caresses. It sucked the contents of my mind day and night, leaving my brain as empty as a broken wine-jug. Ten years! Ishtar 104

preserve us!”

Conan found no reply, but stood holding the stump of the torch, and trailing his great sword.

Surely the man was mad – yet there was no madness in the dark eyes that rested so calmly on him.

“Tell me, is the black wizard in Khorshemish? But no – you need not reply. My powers begin to wake, and I sense in your mind a great battle and a king trapped by treachery. And I see Tsotha-lanti riding hard for the Tybor with Strabonus and the king of Ophir. So much the better. My art is too frail from the long slumber to face Tsotha yet. I need time to recruit my strength, to assemble my powers. Let us go forth from these pits.”

Conan jangled his keys discouragedly.

“The grille to the outer door is made fast by a bolt which can be worked only from the outside.

Is there no other exit from these tunnels?”

“Only one, which neither of us would care to use, seeing that it goes down and not up,”

laughed Pelias. “But no matter. Let us see to the grille.”

He moved toward the corridor with uncertain steps, as of long-unused limbs, which gradually became more sure. As he followed Conan remarked uneasily, “There is a cursed big snake creeping about this tunnel. Let us be wary lest we step into his mouth.”

“I remember him of old,” answered Pelias grimly, “the more as I was forced to watch while ten of my acolytes were fed to him. He is Satha, the Old One, chiefest of Tsotha’s pets.”

“Did Tsotha dig these pits for no other reason than to house his cursed monstrosities?” asked Conan.

“He did not dig them. When the city was founded three thousand years ago there were ruins of an earlier city on and about this hill. King Khossus V, the founder, built his palace on the hill, and digging cellars beneath it, came upon a walled-up doorway, which he broke into and discovered the pits, which

were about as we see them now. But his grand vizier came to such a grisly end in them that Khossus in a fright walled up the entrance again. He said the vizier fell into a well – but he had the cellars filled in, and later abandoned the palace itself, and built himself another in the suburbs, from which he fled in a panic on discovering some black mold scattered on the marble floor of his palace one morning.

“He then departed with his whole court to the eastern corner of the kingdom and built a new city. The palace on the hill was not used and fell into ruins. When Akkutho I revived the lost 105

glories of Khorshemish, he built a fortress there. It remained for Tsotha-lanti to rear the scarlet citadel and open the way to the pits again. Whatever fate overtook the grand vizier of Khossus, Tsotha avoided it. He fell into no well, though he did descend into a well he found, and came out with a strange expression which has not since left his eyes.

“I have seen that well, but I do not care to seek in it for wisdom. I am a sorcerer, and older than men reckon, but I am human. As for Tsotha – men say that a dancing-girl of Shadizar slept too near the pre-human ruins on Dagoth Hill and woke in the grip of a black demon; from that unholy union was spawned an accursed hybrid men call Tsotha-lanti –”

Conan cried out sharply and recoiled, thrusting his companion back. Before them rose the great shimmering white form of Satha, an ageless hate in its eyes. Conan tensed himself for one mad berserker onslaught – to thrust the glowing fagot into that fiendish countenance and throw his life into the ripping sword-stroke. But the snake was not looking at him. It was glaring over his shoulder at the man called Pelias, who stood with his arms folded, smiling. And in the great cold yellow eyes slowly the hate died out in a glitter of pure fear – the only time Conan ever saw such an expression in a reptile’s eyes. With a swirling rush like the sweep of a strong wind, the great snake was gone.

“What did he see to frighten him?” asked Conan, eyeing his companion uneasily.

“The scaled people see what escapes the mortal eye,” answered Pelias, cryptically. “You see my fleshly guise; he saw my naked soul.”

An icy trickle disturbed Conan’s spine, and he wondered if, after all, Pelias

were a man, or merely another demon of the pits in a mask of humanity. He contemplated the advisability of driving his sword through his companion's back without further hesitation. But while he pondered, they came to the steel grille, etched blackly in the torches beyond, and the body of Shukeli, still slumped against the bars in a curdled welter of crimson.

Pelias laughed, and his laugh was not pleasant to hear.

"By the ivory hips of Ishtar, who is our doorman? Lo, it is no less than the noble Shukeli, who hanged my young men by their feet and skinned them with squeals of laughter! Do you sleep, Shukeli? Why do you lie so stiffly, with your fat belly sunk in like a dressed pig's?"

"He is dead," muttered Conan, ill at ease to hear these wild words.

"Dead or alive," laughed Pelias, "he shall open the door for us."

He clapped his hands sharply and cried, "Rise, Shukeli! Rise from hell and rise from the 106

bloody floor and open the door for your masters! Rise, I say!"

An awful groan reverberated through the vaults. Conan's hair stood on end and he felt clammy sweat bead his hide. For the body of Shukeli stirred and moved, with infantile gropings of the fat hands. The laughter of Pelias was merciless as a flint hatchet, as the form of the eunuch reeled upright, clutching at the bars of the grille. Conan, glaring at him, felt his blood turn to ice, and the marrow of his bones to water; for Shukeli's wide-open eyes were glassy and empty, and from the great gash in his belly his entrails hung limply to the floor. The eunuch's feet stumbled among his entrails as he worked the bolt, moving like a brainless automaton.

When he had first stirred, Conan had thought that by some incredible chance the eunuch was alive; but the man was dead – had been dead for hours.

Pelias sauntered through the opened grille, and Conan crowded through behind him, sweat pouring from his body, shrinking away from the awful shape that slumped on sagging legs against the grate it held open. Pelias passed on without a backward glance, and Conan followed him, in the grip of nightmare and nausea. He had not taken half a dozen strides when a sodden thud brought him round. Shukeli's corpse lay limply at the foot of the grille.

“His task is done, and hell gapes for him again,” remarked Pelias pleasantly, politely affecting not to notice the strong shudder which shook Conan’s mighty frame.

He led the way up the long stairs, and through the brass skull-crowned door at the top. Conan gripped his sword, expecting a rush of slaves, but silence gripped the citadel. They passed through the black corridor and came into that in which the censers swung, billowing forth their everlasting incense. Still they saw no one.

“The slaves and soldiers are quartered in another part of the citadel,” remarked Pelias.

“Tonight, their master being away, they doubtless lie drunk on wine or lotus-juice.”

Conan glanced through an arched, golden-silled window that let out upon a broad balcony, and swore in surprize to see the dark-blue star-flecked sky. It had been shortly after sunrise when he was thrown into the pits. Now it was past midnight. He could scarcely realize he had been so long underground. He was suddenly aware of thirst and a ravenous appetite. Pelias led the way into a gold-domed chamber, floored with silver, its lapis-lazuli walls pierced by the fretted arches of many doors.

With a sigh Pelias sank onto a silken divan.

“Gold and silks again,” he sighed. “Tsotha affects to be above the pleasures of the flesh, but he is half devil. I am human, despite my black arts. I love ease and good cheer – that’s how Tsotha trapped me. He caught me helpless with drink. Wine is a curse – by the ivory bosom of Ishtar, 107

even as I speak of it, the traitor is here! Friend, please pour me a goblet – hold! I forgot that you are a king. I will pour.”

“The devil with that,” growled Conan, filling a crystal goblet and proffering it to Pelias. Then, lifting the jug, he drank deeply from the mouth, echoing Pelias’ sigh of satisfaction.

“The dog knows good wine,” said Conan, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “But by Crom, Pelias, are we to sit here until his soldiers awake and cut our throats?”

“No fear,” answered Pelias. “Would you like to see how fortune holds with Strabonus?”

Blue fire burned in Conan’s eyes, and he gripped his sword until his knuckles showed blue.

“Oh, to be at sword-points with him!” he rumbled.

Pelias lifted a great shimmering globe from an ebony table.

“Tsotha’s crystal. A childish toy, but useful when there is lack of time for higher science. Look in, your majesty.”

He laid it on the table before Conan’s eyes. The king looked into cloudy depths which deepened and expanded. Slowly images crystallized out of mist and shadows. He was looking on a familiar landscape. Broad plains ran to a wide winding river, beyond which the level lands ran up quickly into a maze of low hills. On the northern bank of the river stood a walled town, guarded by a moat connected at each end with the river.

“By Crom!” ejaculated Conan. “It’s Shamar! The dogs besiege it!”

The invaders had crossed the river; their pavilions stood in the narrow plain between the city and the hills. Their warriors swarmed about the walls, their mail gleaming palely under the moon. Arrows and stones rained on them from the towers and they staggered back, but came on again.

Even as Conan cursed, the scene changed. Tall spires and gleaming domes stood up in the mist, and he looked on his own capital of Tamar, where all was confusion. He saw the steel-clad knights of Poitain, his staunchest supporters, riding out of the gate, hooted and hissed by the multitude which swarmed the streets. He saw looting and rioting, and men-at-arms whose shields bore the insignia of Pellia, manning the towers and swaggering through the markets.

Over all, like a fantasmal mirage, he saw the dark, triumphant face of Prince Arpello of Pellia.

The images faded.

“So!” raved Conan. “My people turn on me the moment my back is turned –”

“Not entirely,” broke in Pelias. “They have heard that you are dead. There is no one to protect them from outer enemies and civil war, they think. Naturally, they turn to the strongest noble, to avoid the horrors of anarchy. They do not trust the Poitanians, remembering former wars.

But Arpello is on hand, and the strongest prince of the central provinces.”

“When I come to Aquilonia again he will be but a headless corpse rotting on Traitor’s Common,” Conan ground his teeth.

“Yet before you can reach your capital,” reminded Pelias, “Strabonus may be before you. At least his riders will be ravaging your kingdom.”

“True!” Conan paced the chamber like a caged lion. “With the fastest horse I could not reach Shamar before midday. Even there I could do no good except to die with the people, when the town falls – as fall it will in a few days at most. From Shamar to Tamar is five days’ ride, even if you kill your horses on the road. Before I could reach my capital and raise an army, Strabonus would be hammering at the gates; because raising an army is going to be hell – all my damnable nobles will have scattered to their own cursed fiefs at the word of my death. And since the people have driven out Trocero of Poitain, there’s none to keep Arpello’s greedy hands off the crown – and the crown-treasure. He’ll hand the country over to Strabonus, in return for a mock-throne – and as soon as Strabonus’ back is turned, he’ll stir up revolt. But the nobles won’t support him, and it will only give Strabonus excuse for annexing the kingdom openly. Oh Crom, Ymir, and Set! If I but had wings to fly like lightning to Tamar!”

Pelias, who sat tapping the jade table-top with his finger-nails, halted suddenly, and rose as with a definite purpose, beckoning Conan to follow. The king complied, sunk in moody thoughts, and Pelias led the way out of the chamber and up a flight of marble, gold-worked stairs that let out on the pinnacle of the citadel, the roof of the tallest tower. It was night, and a strong wind was blowing through the star-filled skies, stirring Conan’s black mane. Far below them twinkled the lights of Khorshemish, seemingly farther away than the stars above them.

Pelias seemed withdrawn and aloof here, one in cold unhuman greatness with the company of the stars.

“There are creatures,” said Pelias, “not alone of earth and sea, but of air and

the far reaches of the skies as well, dwelling apart, unguessed of men. Yet to him who holds the Master-words and Signs and the Knowledge underlying all, they are not malignant nor inaccessible. Watch, and fear not."

He lifted his hands to the skies and sounded a long weird call that seemed to shudder endlessly out into space, dwindling and fading, yet never dying out, only receding farther and farther into some unreckoned cosmos. In the silence that followed, Conan heard a sudden beat of wings in the stars, and recoiled as a huge bat-like creature alighted beside him. He saw its great calm 109

eyes regarding him in the starlight; he saw the forty-foot spread of its giant wings. And he saw it was neither bat nor bird.

"Mount and ride," said Pelias. "By dawn it will bring you to Tamar."

"By Crom!" muttered Conan. "Is this all a nightmare from which I shall presently awaken in my palace at Tamar? What of you? I would not leave you alone among your enemies."

"Be at ease regarding me," answered Pelias. "At dawn the people of Khorshemish will know they have a new master. Doubt not what the gods have sent you. I will meet you in the plain by Shamar."

Doubtfully Conan clambered upon the ridged back, gripping the arched neck, still convinced that he was in the grasp of a fantastic nightmare. With a great rush and thunder of titan wings, the creature took the air, and the king grew dizzy as he saw the lights of the city dwindle far below him.

IV

"The sword that slays the king cuts the cords of the empire."

– Aquilonian proverb.

The streets of Tamar swarmed with howling mobs, shaking fists and rusty pikes. It was the hour before dawn of the second day after the battle of Shamu, and events had occurred so swiftly as to daze the mind. By means known only to Tsotha-lanti, word had reached Tamar of the king's death, within half a dozen hours after the battle. Chaos had resulted. The barons had deserted the royal capital, galloping away to secure their castles against marauding neighbors.

The well-knit kingdom Conan had built up seemed tottering on the edge of dissolution, and commoners and merchants trembled at the imminence of a return of the feudalistic regime. The people howled for a king to protect them against their own aristocracy no less than foreign foes. Count Trocero, left by Conan in charge of the city, tried to reassure them, but in their unreasoning terror they remembered old civil wars, and how this same count had besieged Tamar fifteen years before. It was shouted in the streets that Trocero had betrayed the king; that he planned to plunder the city. The mercenaries began looting the quarters, dragging forth screaming merchants and terrified women.

Trocero swept down on the looters, littered the streets with their corpses, drove them back into their quarter in confusion, and arrested their leaders. Still the people rushed wildly about, with brainless squawks, screaming that the count had incited the riot for his own purposes.

Prince Arpello came before the distracted council and announced himself ready to take over the government of the city until a new king could be decided upon, Conan having no son. While they debated, his agents stole subtly among the people, who snatched at a shred of royalty. The council heard the storm outside the palace windows, where the multitude roared for Arpello the Rescuer. The council surrendered.

Trocero at first refused the order to give up his baton of authority, but the people swarmed about him, hissing and howling, hurling stones and offal at his knights. Seeing the futility of a pitched battle in the streets with Arpello’s retainers, under such conditions, Trocero hurled the baton in his rival’s face, hanged the leaders of the mercenaries in the market-square as his last official act, and rode out of the southern gate at the head of his fifteen hundred steel-clad knights. The gates slammed behind him and Arpello’s suave mask fell away to reveal the grim visage of the hungry wolf.

With the mercenaries cut to pieces or hiding in their barracks, his were the only soldiers in Tamar. Sitting his war-horse in the great square, Arpello proclaimed himself king of Aquilonia, amid the clamor of the deluded multitude.

Publius the Chancellor, who opposed this move, was thrown into prison. The merchants, who had greeted the proclamation of a king with relief, now found with consternation that the new monarch’s first act was to levy a staggering

tax on them. Six rich merchants, sent as a delegation of protest, were seized and their heads slashed off without ceremony. A shocked and stunned silence followed this execution. The merchants, confronted by a power they could not control with money, fell on their fat bellies and licked their oppressor’s boots.

The common people were not perturbed at the fate of the merchants, but they began to murmur when they found that the swaggering Pellian soldiery, pretending to maintain order, were as bad as Turanian bandits. Complaints of extortion, murder and rape poured in to Arpello, who had taken up his quarters in Publius’ palace, because the desperate councillors, doomed by his order, were holding the royal palace against his soldiers. He had taken possession of the pleasure-palace, however, and Conan’s girls were dragged to his quarters. The people muttered at the sight of the royal beauties writhing in the brutal hands of the iron-clad retainers – dark-eyed damsels of Poitain, slim black-haired wenches from Zamora, Zingara and Hyrkania, Brythunian girls with tousled yellow heads, all weeping with fright and shame, unused to brutality.

Night fell on a city of bewilderment and turmoil, and before midnight word spread mysteriously in the street that the Kothians had followed up their victory and were hammering at the walls of Shamar. Somebody in Tsotha’s mysterious secret-service had babbled. Fear shook the people like an earthquake, and they did not even pause to wonder at the witchcraft by which the news had been so swiftly transmitted. They stormed at Arpello’s doors, demanding that he march southward and drive the enemy back over the Tybor. He might have subtly 111

pointed out that his force was not sufficient, and that he could not raise an army until the barons recognized his claim to the crown. But he was drunk with power, and laughed in their faces.

A young student, Athemides, mounted a column in the market, and with burning words accused Arpello of being a cats-paw for Strabonus, painting a vivid picture of existence under Kothian rule, with Arpello as satrap. Before he finished, the multitude was screaming with fear and howling with rage. Arpello sent his soldiers to arrest the youth, but the people caught him up and fled with him, deluging the pursuing retainers with stones and dead cats. A volley of crossbow quarrels routed the mob, and a charge of horsemen littered the market with bodies, but Athemides was smuggled out of the city to plead with Trocero to retake Tamar, and march to aid Shamar.

Athemides found Trocero breaking his camp outside the walls, ready to march to Poitain, in the far southwestern corner of the kingdom. To the youth's urgent pleas he answered that he had neither the force necessary to storm Tamar, even with the aid of the mob inside, nor to face Strabonus. Besides, avaricious nobles would plunder Poitain behind his back, while he was fighting the Kothians. With the king dead, each man must protect his own. He was riding to Poitain, there to defend it as best he might against Arpello and his foreign allies.

While Athemides pleaded with Trocero, the mob still raved in the city with helpless fury.

Under the great tower beside the royal palace the people swirled and milled, screaming their hate at Arpello, who stood on the turrets and laughed down at them while his archers ranged the parapets, bolts drawn and fingers on the triggers of their arbalests.

The prince of Pellia was a broad-built man of medium height, with a dark stern face. He was an intriguer, but he was also a fighter. Under his silken jupon with its gilt-braided skirts and jagged sleeves, glimmered burnished steel. His long black hair was curled and scented, and bound back with a cloth-of-silver band, but at his hip hung a broadsword the jeweled hilt of which was worn with battles and campaigns.

"Fools! Howl as you will! Conan is dead and Arpello is king!"

What if all Aquilonia were leagued against him? He had men enough to hold the mighty walls until Strabonus came up. But Aquilonia was divided against itself. Already the barons were girding themselves each to seize his neighbor's treasure. Arpello had only the helpless mob to deal with. Strabonus would carve through the loose lines of the warring barons as a galley-ram through foam, and until his coming, Arpello had only to hold the royal capital.

"Fools! Arpello is king!"

The sun was rising over the eastern towers. Out of the crimson dawn came a flying speck that grew to a bat, then to an eagle. Then all who saw screamed in amazement, for over the walls of Tamar swooped a shape such as men

knew only in half-forgotten legends, and from between its titan-wings sprang a human form as it roared over the great tower. Then with a deafening thunder of wings it was gone, and the folk blinked, wondering if they dreamed. But on the turret stood a wild barbaric figure, half naked, blood-stained, brandishing a great sword. And from the multitude rose a roar that rocked the towers, *"The king! It is the king!"*

Arpello stood transfixed; then with a cry he drew and leaped at Conan. With a lion-like roar the Cimmerian parried the whistling blade, then dropping his own sword, gripped the prince and heaved him high above his head by crotch and neck.

"Take your plots to hell with you!" he roared, and like a sack of salt, he hurled the prince of Pellia far out, to fall through empty space for a hundred and fifty feet. The people gave back as the body came hurtling down, to smash on the marble pave, spattering blood and brains, and lie crushed in its splintered armor, like a mangled beetle.

The archers on the tower shrank back, their nerve broken. They fled, and the beleaguered councilmen sallied from the palace and hewed into them with joyous abandon. Pellian knights and men-at-arms sought safety in the streets, and the crowd tore them to pieces. In the streets the fighting milled and eddied, plumed helmets and steel caps tossed among the tousled heads and then vanished; swords hacked madly in a heaving forest of pikes, and over all rose the roar of the mob, shouts of acclaim mingling with screams of blood-lust and howls of agony. And high above all, the naked figure of the king rocked and swayed on the dizzy battlements, mighty arms brandished, roaring with gargantuan laughter that mocked all mobs and princes, even himself.

V

A long bow and a strong bow, and let the sky grow dark!

The cord to the nock, the shaft to the ear, and the king of Koth for a mark!

– Song of the Bossonian Archers.

The midafternoon sun glinted on the placid waters of the Tybor, washing the southern bastions of Shamar. The haggard defenders knew that few of them would see that sun rise again. The pavilions of the besiegers dotted the plain. The people of Shamar had not been able successfully to dispute the crossing of the river, outnumbered as they were. Barges, chained together, made a bridge over which the invader poured his hordes. Strabonus had not dared

march on into Aquilonia with Shamar, unsubdued, at his back. He had sent his light riders, his 113

spahis, inland to ravage the country, and had reared up his siege engines in the plain. He had anchored a flotilla of boats, furnished him by Amalrus, in the middle of the stream, over against the river-wall. Some of these boats had been sunk by stones from the city's ballistas, which crashed through their decks and ripped out their planking, but the rest held their places and from their bows and mast-heads, protected by mantlets, archers raked the riverward turrets.

These were Shemites, born with bows in their hands, not to be matched by Aquilonian archers.

On the landward side mangonels rained boulders and tree-trunks among the defenders, shattering through roofs and crushing humans like beetles; rams pounded incessantly at the stones; sappers burrowed like moles in the earth, sinking their mines beneath the towers. The moat had been dammed at the upper end, and emptied of its water, had been filled up with boulders, earth and dead horses and men. Under the walls the mailed figures swarmed, battering at the gates, rearing up scaling-ladders, pushing storming-towers, thronged with spearmen, against the turrets.

Hope had been abandoned in the city, where a bare fifteen hundred men resisted forty thousand warriors. No word had come from the kingdom whose outpost the city was. Conan was dead, so the invaders shouted exultantly. Only the strong walls and the desperate courage of the defenders had kept them so long at bay, and that could not suffice for ever. The western wall was a mass of rubbish on which the defenders stumbled in hand-to-hand conflict with the invaders. The other walls were buckling from the mines beneath them, the towers leaning drunkenly.

Now the attackers were massing for a storm. The oliphants sounded, the steel-clad ranks drew up on the plain. The storming-towers, covered with raw bull-hides, rumbled forward. The people of Shamar saw the banners of Koth and Ophir, flying side by side, in the center, and made out, among their gleaming knights, the slim lethal figure of the golden-mailed Amalrus, and the squat black-armored form of Strabonus. And between them was a shape that made the bravest blench with horror – a lean vulture figure in a filmy robe. The pikemen moved forward, flowing over the ground like the glinting waves of a river of molten steel; the knights cantered forward, lances lifted, guidons

streaming. The warriors on the walls drew a long breath, consigned their souls to Mitra, and gripped their notched and red-stained weapons.

Then without warning, a bugle-call cut the din. A drum of hoofs rose above the rumble of the approaching host. North of the plain across which the army moved, rose ranges of low hills, mounting northward and westward like giant stair-steps. Now down out of these hills, like spume blown before a storm, shot the spahis who had been laying waste the countryside, riding low and spurring hard, and behind them sun shimmered on moving ranks of steel. They moved into full view, out of the defiles – mailed horsemen, the great lion banner of Aquilonia floating over them.

From the electrified watchers on the towers a great shout rent the skies. In ecstasy warriors 114

clashed their notched swords on their riven shields, and the people of the town, ragged beggars and rich merchants, harlots in red kirtles and dames in silks and satins, fell to their knees and cried out for joy to Mitra, tears of gratitude streaming down their faces.

Strabonus, frantically shouting orders, with Arbanus, that would wheel around the ponderous lines to meet this unexpected menace, grunted, “We still outnumber them, unless they have reserves hidden in the hills. The men on the battle-towers can mask any sorties from the city.

These are Poitanians – we might have guessed Trocero would try some such mad gallantry.”

Amalrus cried out in unbelief.

“I see Trocero and his captain Prospero – *but who rides between them?”*

“Ishtar preserve us!” shrieked Strabonus, paling. “It is King Conan!”

“You are mad!” squalled Tsotha, starting convulsively. “Conan has been in Satha’s belly for days!” He stopped short, glaring wildly at the host which was dropping down, file by file, into the plain. He could not mistake the giant figure in black, gilt-worked armor on the great black stallion, riding beneath the billowing silken folds of the great banner. A scream of feline fury burst from Tsotha’s lips, flecking his beard with foam. For the first time in his life, Strabonus saw the wizard completely upset, and shrank from the sight.

“Here is sorcery!” screamed Tsotha, clawing madly at his beard. “How could he have escaped and reached his kingdom in time to return with an army so quickly? This is the work of Pelias, curse him! I feel his hand in this! May I be cursed for not killing him when I had the power!”

The kings gaped at the mention of a man they believed ten years dead, and panic, emanating from the leaders, shook the host. All recognized the rider on the black stallion. Tsotha felt the superstitious dread of his men, and fury made a hellish mask of his face.

“Strike home!” he screamed, brandishing his lean arms madly. “We are still the stronger!

Charge and crush these dogs! We shall yet feast in the ruins of Shamar tonight! Oh, Set!” he lifted his hands and invoked the serpent-god to even Strabonus’ horror, “grant us victory and I swear I will offer up to thee five hundred virgins of Shamar, writhing in their blood!”

Meanwhile the opposing host had debouched onto the plain. With the knights came what seemed a second, irregular army on tough swift ponies. These dismounted and formed their ranks on foot – stolid Bossonian archers, and keen pikemen from Gunderland, their tawny locks blowing from under their steel caps.

It was a motley army Conan had assembled, in the wild hours following his return to his 115

capital. He had beaten the frothing mob away from the Pellian soldiers who held the outer walls of Tamar, and impressed them into his service. He had sent a swift rider after Trocero to bring him back. With these as a nucleus of an army he had raced southward, sweeping the countryside for recruits and for mounts. Nobles of Tamar and the surrounding countryside had augmented his forces, and he had levied recruits from every village and castle along his road.

Yet it was but a paltry force he had gathered to dash against the invading hosts, though of the quality of tempered steel.

Nineteen hundred armored horsemen followed him, the main bulk of which consisted of the Poitanian knights. The remnants of the mercenaries and professional soldiers in the trains of loyal noblemen made up his infantry –

five thousand archers and four thousand pikemen. This host now came on in good order – first the archers, then the pikemen, behind them the knights, moving at a walk.

Over against them Arbanus ordered his lines, and the allied army moved forward like a shimmering ocean of steel. The watchers on the city walls shook to see that vast host, which overshadowed the powers of the rescuers. First marched the Shemitish archers, then the Kothian spearmen, then the mailed knights of Strabonus and Amalrus. Arbanus' intent was obvious – to employ his footmen to sweep away the infantry of Conan, and open the way for an overpowering charge of his heavy cavalry.

The Shemites opened fire at five hundred yards, and arrows flew like hail between the hosts, darkening the sun. The western archers, trained by a thousand years of merciless warfare with the Pictish savages, came stolidly on, closing their ranks as their comrades fell. They were far outnumbered, and the Shemitish bow had the longer range, but in accuracy the Bossonians were equal to their foes, and they balanced sheer skill in archery by superiority in morale, and in excellency of armor. Within good range they loosed, and the Shemites went down by whole ranks. The blue-bearded warriors in their light mail shirts could not endure punishment as could the heavier-armored Bossonians. They broke, throwing away their bows, and their flight disordered the ranks of the Kothian spearmen behind them.

Without the support of the archers, these men-at-arms fell by the hundreds before the shafts of the Bossonians, and charging madly in to close quarters, they were met by the spears of the pikemen. No infantry was a match for the wild Gundermen, whose homeland, the northernmost province of Aquilonia, was but a day's ride across the Bossonian marches from the borders of Cimmeria, and who, born and bred to battle, were the purest blood of all the Hyborian peoples. The Kothian spearmen, dazed by their losses from arrows, were cut to pieces and fell back in disorder.

Strabonus roared in fury as he saw his infantry repulsed, and shouted for a general charge.

Arbanus demurred, pointing out the Bossonians re-forming in good order before the Aquilonian knights, who had sat their steeds motionless during the melee. The general advised 116

a temporary retirement, to draw the western knights out of the cover of the

bows, but Strabonus was mad with rage. He looked at the long shimmering ranks of his knights, he glared at the handful of mailed figures over against him, and he commanded Arbanus to give the order to charge.

The general commended his soul to Ishtar and sounded the golden oliphant. With a thunderous roar the forest of lances dipped, and the great host rolled across the plain, gaining momentum as it came. The whole plain shook to the rumbling avalanche of hoofs, and the shimmer of gold and steel dazzled the watchers on the towers of Shamar.

The squadrons clave the loose ranks of the spearmen, riding down friend and foe alike, and rushed into the teeth of a blast of arrows from the Bossonians. Across the plain they thundered, grimly riding the storm that scattered their way with gleaming knights like autumn leaves.

Another hundred paces and they would ride among the Bossonians and cut them down like corn; but flesh and blood could not endure the rain of death that now ripped and howled among them. Shoulder to shoulder, feet braced wide, stood the archers, drawing shaft to ear and loosing as one man, with deep, short shouts.

The whole front rank of the knights melted away, and over the pin-cushioned corpses of horses and riders, their comrades stumbled and fell headlong. Arbanus was down, an arrow through his throat, his skull smashed by the hoofs of his dying war-horse, and confusion ran through the disordered host. Strabonus was screaming an order, Amalrus another, and through all ran the superstitious dread the sight of Conan had awakened.

And while the gleaming ranks milled in confusion, the trumpets of Conan sounded, and through the opening ranks of the archers crashed the terrible charge of the Aquilonian knights.

The hosts met with a shock like that of an earthquake, that shook the tottering towers of Shamar. The disorganized squadrons of the invaders could not withstand the solid steel wedge, bristling with spears, that rushed like a thunderbolt against them. The long lances of the attackers ripped their ranks to pieces, and into the heart of their host rode the knights of Poitain, swinging their terrible two-handed swords.

The clash and clangor of steel was as that of a million sledges on as many anvils. The watchers on the walls were stunned and deafened by the thunder as they gripped the battlements and watched the steel maelstrom swirl and eddy, where plumes tossed high among the flashing swords, and standards

dipped and reeled.

Amalrus went down, dying beneath the trampling hoofs, his shoulder-bone hewn in twain by Prospero’s two-handed sword. The invaders’ numbers had engulfed the nineteen hundred knights of Conan, but about this compact wedge, which hewed deeper and deeper into the looser formation of their foes, the knights of Koth and Ophir swirled and smote in vain. They 117

could not break the wedge.

Archers and pikemen, having disposed of the Kothian infantry which was strewn in flight across the plain, came to the edges of the fight, loosing their arrows point-blank, running in to slash at girths and horses’ bellies with their knives, thrusting upward to spit the riders on their long pikes.

At the tip of the steel wedge Conan roared his heathen battle-cry and swung his great sword in glittering arcs that made naught of steel burgonet or mail habergeon. Straight through a thundering waste of foes he rode, and the knights of Koth closed in behind him, cutting him off from his warriors. As a thunderbolt strikes, Conan struck, hurtling through the ranks by sheer power and velocity, until he came to Strabonus, livid among his palace troops. Now here the battle hung in balance, for with his superior numbers, Strabonus still had opportunity to pluck victory from the knees of the gods.

But he screamed when he saw his arch-foe within arm’s length at last, and lashed out wildly with his axe. It clanged on Conan’s helmet, striking fire, and the Cimmerian reeled and struck back. The five-foot blade crushed Strabonus’ casque and skull, and the king’s charger reared screaming, hurling a limp and sprawling corpse from the saddle. A great cry went up from the host, which faltered and gave back. Trocero and his house troops, hewing desperately, cut their way to Conan’s side, and the great banner of Koth went down. Then behind the dazed and stricken invaders went up a mighty clamor and the blaze of a huge conflagration. The defenders of Shamar had made a desperate sortie, cut down the men masking the gates, and were raging among the tents of the besiegers, cutting down the camp followers, burning the pavilions, and destroying the siege engines. It was the last straw. The gleaming army melted away in flight, and the furious conquerors cut them down as they ran.

The fugitives raced for the river, but the men on the flotilla, harried sorely by the stones and shafts of the revived citizens, cast loose and pulled for the southern shore, leaving their comrades to their fate. Of these many gained the

shore, racing across the barges that served as a bridge, until the men of Shamar cut these adrift and severed them from the shore. Then the fight became a slaughter. Driven into the river to drown in their armor, or hacked down along the bank, the invaders perished by the thousands. No quarter they had promised; no quarter they got.

From the foot of the low hills to the shores of the Tybor, the plain was littered with corpses, and the river whose tide ran red, floated thick with the dead. Of the nineteen hundred knights who had ridden south with Conan, scarcely five hundred lived to boast of their scars, and the slaughter among the archers and pikemen was ghastly. But the great and shining host of Strabonus and Amalrus was hacked out of existence, and those that fled were less than those that died.

While the slaughter yet went on along the river, the final act of a grim drama was being played out in the meadowland beyond. Among those who had crossed the barge-bridge before it was destroyed was Tsotha, riding like the wind on a gaunt weird-looking steed whose stride no natural horse could match. Ruthlessly riding down friend and foe, he gained the southern bank, and then a glance backward showed him a grim figure on a great black stallion in pursuit. The lashings had already been cut, and the barges were drifting apart, but Conan came recklessly on, leaping his steed from boat to boat as a man might leap from one cake of floating ice to another. Tsotha screamed a curse, but the great stallion took the last leap with a straining groan, and gained the southern bank. Then the wizard fled away into the empty meadowland, and on his trail came the king, riding hard, swinging the great sword that spattered his trail with crimson drops.

On they fled, the hunted and the hunter, and not a foot could the black stallion gain, though he strained each nerve and thew. Through a sunset land of dim and illusive shadows they fled, till sight and sound of the slaughter died out behind them. Then in the sky appeared a dot, that grew into a huge eagle as it approached. Swooping down from the sky, it drove at the head of Tsotha’s steed, which screamed and reared, throwing its rider.

Old Tsotha rose and faced his pursuer, his eyes those of a maddened serpent, his face an inhuman mask. In each hand he held something that shimmered, and Conan knew he held death there.

The king dismounted and strode toward his foe, his armor clanking, his great sword gripped high.

“Again we meet, wizard!” he grinned savagely.

“Keep off!” screamed Tsotha like a blood-mad jackal. “I’ll blast the flesh from your bones!

You can not conquer me – if you hack me in pieces, the bits of flesh and bone will reunite and haunt you to your doom! I see the hand of Pelias in this, but I defy ye both! I am Tsotha, son of

_”

Conan rushed, sword gleaming, eyes slits of wariness. Tsotha’s right hand came back and forward, and the king ducked quickly. Something passed by his helmeted head and exploded behind him, searing the very sands with a flash of hellish fire. Before Tsotha could toss the globe in his left hand, Conan’s sword sheared through his lean neck. The wizard’s head shot from his shoulders on an arching fount of blood, and the robed figure staggered and crumpled drunkenly. Yet the mad black eyes glared up at Conan with no dimming of their feral light, the lips writhed awfully, and the hands groped, as if searching for the severed head. Then with a swift rush of wings, something swooped from the sky – the eagle which had attacked Tsotha’s horse. In its mighty talons it snatched up the dripping head and soared skyward, and Conan stood struck dumb, for from the eagle’s throat boomed human laughter, in the voice of Pelias 119

the sorcerer.

Then a hideous thing came to pass, for the headless body reared up from the sand, and staggered away in awful flight on stiffening legs, hands blindly outstretched toward the dot speeding and dwindling in the dusky sky. Conan stood like one turned to stone, watching until the swift reeling figure faded in the dusk that purpled the meadows.

“Crom!” his mighty shoulders twitched. “A murrain on these wizardly feuds! Pelias has dealt well with me, but I care not if I see him no more. Give me a clean sword and a clean foe to flesh it in. Damnation! What would I not give for a flagon of wine!”

Queen of the Black Coast

Queen of the Black Coast

I

CONAN JOINS THE PIRATES

Believe green buds awaken in the spring,

That autumn paints the leaves with somber fire;

Believe I held my heart inviolate

To lavish on one man my hot desire.

– The Song of Bêlit.

Hoofs drummed down the street that sloped to the wharfs. The folk that yelled and scattered had only a fleeting glimpse of a mailed figure on a black stallion, a wide scarlet cloak flowing out on the wind. Far up the street came the shout and clatter of pursuit, but the horseman did not look back. He swept out onto the wharfs and jerked the plunging stallion back on its haunches at the very lip of the pier. Seamen gaped up at him, as they stood to the sweep and striped sail of a high-prowed, broad-waisted galley. The master, sturdy and black-bearded, stood in the bows, easing her away from the piles with a boat-hook. He yelled angrily as the horseman sprang from the saddle and with a long leap landed squarely on the mid-deck.

“Who invited you aboard?”

“Get under way!” roared the intruder with a fierce gesture that spattered red drops from his broadsword.

“But we’re bound for the coasts of Cush!” expostulated the master.

“Then I’m for Cush! Push off, I tell you!” The other cast a quick glance up the street, along which a squad of horsemen were galloping; far behind them toiled a group of archers, crossbows on their shoulders.

“Can you pay for your passage?” demanded the master.

“I pay my way with steel!” roared the man in armor, brandishing the great sword that glittered bluely in the sun. “By Crom, man, if you don’t get under way, I’ll drench this galley in the blood of its crew!”

The shipmaster was a good judge of men. One glance at the dark scarred face of the swordsman, hardened with passion, and he shouted a quick order, thrusting strongly against the piles. The galley wallowed out into clear water, the oars began to clack rhythmically; then a puff of wind filled the shimmering sail, the light ship heeled to the gust, then took her course like a swan, gathering headway as she skimmed along.

On the wharfs the riders were shaking their swords and shouting threats and commands that the ship put about, and yelling for the bowmen to hasten before the craft was out of arbalest range.

“Let them rave,” grinned the swordsman hardly. “Do you keep her on her course, master steersman.”

The master descended from the small deck between the bows, made his way between the rows of oarsmen, and mounted the mid-deck. The stranger stood there with his back to the mast, eyes narrowed alertly, sword ready. The shipman eyed him steadily, careful not to make any move toward the long knife in his belt. He saw a tall powerfully built figure in a black scale-mail hauberk, burnished greaves and a blue-steel helmet from which jutted bull’s horns highly polished. From the mailed shoulders fell the scarlet cloak, blowing in the sea-wind. A broad shagreen belt with a golden buckle held the scabbard of the broadsword he bore. Under the horned helmet a square-cut black mane contrasted with smoldering blue eyes.

“If we must travel together,” said the master, “we may as well be at peace with each other. My name is Tito, licensed master-shipman of the ports of Argos. I am bound for Cush, to trade beads and silks and sugar and brass-hilted swords to the black kings for ivory, copra, copper ore, slaves and pearls.”

The swordsman glanced back at the rapidly receding docks, where the figures still gesticulated helplessly, evidently having trouble in finding a boat swift

enough to overhaul the fast-sailing galley.

“I am Conan, a Cimmerian,” he answered. “I came into Argos seeking employment, but with no wars forward, there was nothing to which I might turn my hand.”

“Why do the guardsmen pursue you?” asked Tito. “Not that it’s any of my business, but I thought perhaps –”

“I’ve nothing to conceal,” replied the Cimmerian. “By Crom, though I’ve spent considerable time among you civilized peoples, your ways are still beyond my comprehension.

“Well, last night in a tavern, a captain in the king’s guard offered violence to the sweetheart of a young soldier, who naturally ran him through. But it seems there is some cursed law against killing guardsmen, and the boy and his girl fled away. It was bruited about that I was seen with them, and so today I was haled into court, and a judge asked me where the lad had gone. I replied that since he was a friend of mine, I could not betray him. Then the court waxed wroth, and the judge talked a great deal about my duty to the state, and society, and other things I did not understand, and bade me tell where my friend had flown. By this time I was becoming wrathful myself, for I had explained my position.

“But I choked my ire and held my peace, and the judge squalled that I had shown contempt for the court, and that I should be hurled into a dungeon to rot until I betrayed my friend. So then, seeing they were all mad, I drew my sword and cleft the judge’s skull; then I cut my way out of the court, and seeing the high constable’s stallion tied near by, I rode for the wharfs, where I thought to find a ship bound for foreign parts.”

“Well,” said Tito hardily, “the courts have fleeced me too often in suits with rich merchants for me to owe them any love. I’ll have questions to answer if I ever anchor in that port again, but I can prove I acted under compulsion. You may as well put up your sword. We're peaceable sailors, and have nothing against you. Besides, it’s as well to have a fighting-man like yourself on board. Come up to the poop-deck and we’ll have a tankard of ale.”

“Good enough,” readily responded the Cimmerian, sheathing his sword.

The *Argus* was a small sturdy ship, typical of those trading-craft which ply between the ports of Zingara and Argos and the southern coasts, hugging the shoreline and seldom venturing far into the open ocean. It was high of stern, with a tall curving prow; broad in the waist, sloping beautifully to stem and stern. It was guided by the long sweep from the poop, and propulsion was furnished mainly by the broad striped silk sail, aided by a jibsail. The oars were for use in tacking out of creeks and bays, and during calms. There were ten to the side, five fore and five aft of the small mid-deck. The most precious part of the cargo was lashed under this deck, and under the fore-deck. The men slept on deck or between the rowers' benches, protected, in bad weather, by canopies. With twenty men at the oars, three at the sweep, and the shipmaster, the crew was complete.

So the *Argus* pushed steadily southward, with consistently fair weather. The sun beat down from day to day with fiercer heat, and the canopies were run up – striped silken cloths that matched the shimmering sail and the shining gold-work on the prow and along the gunwales.

They sighted the coast of Shem – long rolling meadowlands with the white crowns of the towers of cities in the distance, and horsemen with blue-black beards and hooked noses, who sat their steeds along the shore and eyed the galley with suspicion. She did not put in; there was scant profit in trade with the sons of Shem.

Nor did master Tito pull into the broad bay where the Styx river emptied its gigantic flood into the ocean, and the massive black castles of Khemi loomed over the blue waters. Ships did not put unasked into this port, where dusky sorcerers wove awful spells in the murk of sacrificial smoke mounting eternally from blood-stained altars where naked women screamed, and where Set, the Old Serpent, arch-demon of the Hyborians but god of the Stygians, was said to writhe his shining coils among his worshippers.

Master Tito gave that dreamy glass-floored bay a wide berth, even when a serpent-prowed gondola shot from behind a castellated point of land, and naked dusky women, with great red blossoms in their hair, stood and called to his sailors, and posed and postured brazenly.

Now no more shining towers rose inland. They had passed the southern borders of Stygia and were cruising along the coasts of Cush. The sea and the

ways of the sea were never-ending mysteries to Conan, whose homeland was among the high hills of the northern uplands. The wanderer was no less of interest to the sturdy seamen, few of whom had ever seen one of his race.

They were characteristic Argosean sailors, short and stockily built. Conan towered above them, and no two of them could match his strength. They were hardy and robust, but his was the endurance and vitality of a wolf, his thews steeled and his nerves whetted by the hardness of his life in the world's wastelands. He was quick to laugh, quick and terrible in his wrath. He was a valiant trencherman, and strong drink was a passion and a weakness with him. Naïve as a child in many ways, unfamiliar with the sophistry of civilization, he was naturally intelligent, jealous of his rights, and dangerous as a hungry tiger. Young in years, he was hardened in warfare and wandering, and his sojourns in many lands were evident in his apparel. His horned helmet was such as was worn by the golden-haired Æsir of Nordheim; his hauberk and greaves were of the finest workmanship of Koth; the fine ring-mail which sheathed his arms and legs was of Nemedia; the blade at his girdle was a great Aquilonian broadsword; and his gorgeous scarlet cloak could have been spun nowhere but in Ophir.

So they beat southward, and master Tito began to look for the high-walled villages of the black people. But they found only smoking ruins on the shore of a bay, littered with naked black bodies. Tito swore.

"I had good trade here, aforetime. This is the work of pirates."

"And if we meet them?" Conan loosened his great blade in its scabbard.

"Mine is no warship. We run, not fight. Yet if it came to a pinch, we have beaten off reavers before, and might do it again; unless it were Bêlit's *Tigress*."

"Who is Bêlit?"

"The wildest she-devil unhanged. Unless I read the signs a-wrong, it was her butchers who destroyed that village on the bay. May I some day see her dangling from the yard-arm! She is called the queen of the black coast. She is a Shemite woman, who leads black raiders. They harry the shipping and have sent many a good tradesman to the bottom."

From under the poop-deck Tito brought out quilted jerkins, steel caps, bows and arrows.

“Little use to resist if we’re run down,” he grunted. “But it rasps the soul to give up life without a struggle.”

It was just at sunrise when the lookout shouted a warning. Around the long point of an island off the starboard bow glided a long lethal shape, a slender serpentine galley, with a raised deck that ran from stem to stern. Forty oars on each side drove her swiftly through the water, and the low rail swarmed with naked blacks that chanted and clashed spears on oval shields. From the masthead floated a long crimson pennon.

“Bêlit!” yelled Tito, paling. “Yare! Put her about! Into that creek-mouth! If we can beach her before they run us down, we have a chance to escape with our lives!”

So, veering sharply, the *Argus* ran for the line of surf that boomed along the palm-fringed shore, Tito striding back and forth, exhorting the panting rowers to greater efforts. The master’s black beard bristled, his eyes glared.

“Give me a bow,” requested Conan. “It’s not my idea of a manly weapon, but I learned archery among the Hyrkanians, and it will go hard if I can’t feather a man or so on yonder deck.”

Standing on the poop, he watched the serpent-like ship skimming lightly over the waters, and landsman though he was, it was evident to him that the *Argus* would never win that race.

Already arrows, arching from the pirate’s deck, were falling with a hiss into the sea, not twenty paces astern.

“We’d best stand to it,” growled the Cimmerian; “else we’ll all die with shafts in our backs, 125

and not a blow dealt.”

“Bend to it, dogs!” roared Tito with a passionate gesture of his brawny fist. The bearded rowers grunted, heaved at the oars, while their muscles coiled and knotted, and sweat started out on their hides. The timbers of the stout little galley creaked and groaned as the men fairly ripped her through the

water. The wind had fallen; the sail hung limp. Nearer crept the inexorable raiders, and they were still a good mile from the surf when one of the steersmen fell gagging across the sweep, a long arrow through his neck. Tito sprang to take his place, and Conan, bracing his feet wide on the heaving poop-deck, lifted his bow. He could see the details of the pirate plainly now. The rowers were protected by a line of raised mantelets along the sides, but the warriors dancing on the narrow deck were in full view. These were painted and plumed, and mostly naked, brandishing spears and spotted shields.

On the raised platform in the bows stood a slim figure whose white skin glistened in dazzling contrast to the glossy ebon hides about it. Bêlit, without a doubt. Conan drew the shaft to his ear – then some whim or qualm stayed his hand and sent the arrow through the body of a tall plumed spearman beside her.

Hand over hand the pirate galley was overhauling the lighter ship. Arrows fell in a rain about the *Argus*, and men cried out. All the steersmen were down, pin-cushioned, and Tito was handling the massive sweep alone, gasping black curses, his braced legs knots of straining thews. Then with a sob he sank down, a long shaft quivering in his sturdy heart. The *Argus* lost headway and rolled in the swell. The men shouted in confusion, and Conan took command in characteristic fashion.

“Up, lads!” he roared, loosing with a vicious twang of cord. “Grab your steel and give these dogs a few knocks before they cut our throats! Useless to bend your backs any more: they’ll board us ere we can row another fifty paces!”

In desperation the sailors abandoned their oars and snatched up their weapons. It was valiant, but useless. They had time for one flight of arrows before the pirate was upon them. With no one at the sweep, the *Argus* rolled broadside, and the steel-beaked prow of the raider crashed into her amidships. Grappling-irons crunched into the side. From the lofty gunwales, the black pirates drove down a volley of shafts that tore through the quilted jackets of the doomed sailormen, then sprang down spear in hand to complete the slaughter. On the deck of the pirate lay half a dozen bodies, an earnest of Conan’s archery.

The fight on the *Argus* was short and bloody. The stocky sailors, no match for the tall barbarians, were cut down to a man. Elsewhere the battle had taken a peculiar turn. Conan, on the high-pitched poop, was on a level with the pirate’s deck. As the steel prow slashed into the *Argus*, he braced himself and

kept his feet under the shock, casting away his bow. A tall corsair, bounding over the rail, was met in midair by the Cimmerian's great sword, which 126

sheared him cleanly through the torso, so that his body fell one way and his legs another. Then, with a burst of fury that left a heap of mangled corpses along the gunwales, Conan was over the rail and on the deck of the *Tigress*.

In an instant he was the center of a hurricane of stabbing spears and lashing clubs. But he moved in a blinding blur of steel. Spears bent on his armor or swished empty air, and his sword sang its death-song. The fighting-madness of his race was upon him, and with a red mist of unreasoning fury wavering before his blazing eyes, he cleft skulls, smashed breasts, severed limbs, ripped out entrails, and littered the deck like a shambles with a ghastly harvest of brains and blood.

Invulnerable in his armor, his back against the mast, he heaped mangled corpses at his feet until his enemies gave back panting in rage and fear. Then as they lifted their spears to cast them, and he tensed himself to leap and die in the midst of them, a shrill cry froze the lifted arms. They stood like statues, the black giants poised for the spear-casts, the mailed swordsman with his dripping blade.

Bêlit sprang before the blacks, beating down their spears. She turned toward Conan, her bosom heaving, her eyes flashing. Fierce fingers of wonder caught at his heart. She was slender, yet formed like a goddess: at once lithe and voluptuous. Her only garment was a broad silken girdle. Her white ivory limbs and the ivory globes of her breasts drove a beat of fierce passion through the Cimmerian's pulse, even in the panting fury of battle. Her rich black hair, black as a Stygian night, fell in rippling burnished clusters down her supple back. Her dark eyes burned on the Cimmerian.

She was untamed as a desert wind, supple and dangerous as a she-panther. She came close to him, heedless of his great blade, dripping with the blood of her warriors. Her supple thigh brushed against it, so close she came to the tall warrior. Her red lips parted as she stared up into his somber menacing eyes.

"Who are you?" she demanded. "By Ishtar, I have never seen your like, though I have ranged the sea from the coasts of Zingara to the fires of the ultimate south. Whence come you?"

"From Argos," he answered shortly, alert for treachery. Let her slim hand

move toward the jeweled dagger in her girdle, and a buffet of his open hand would stretch her senseless on the deck. Yet in his heart he did not fear; he had held too many women, civilized or barbaric, in his iron-thewed arms, not to recognize the light that burned in the eyes of this one.

“You are no soft Hyborian!” she exclaimed. “You are fierce and hard as a gray wolf. Those 127

eyes were never dimmed by city lights; those thews were never softened by life amid marble walls.”

“I am Conan, a Cimmerian,” he answered.

To the people of the exotic climes, the north was a mazy half-mythical realm, peopled with ferocious blue-eyed giants who occasionally descended from their icy fastnesses with torch and sword. Their raids had never taken them as far south as Shem, and this daughter of Shem made no distinction between Æsir, Vanir or Cimmerian. With the unerring instinct of the elemental feminine, she knew she had found her lover, and his race meant naught, save as it invested him with the glamor of far lands.

“And I am Bêlit,” she cried, as one might say, “I am queen!”

“Look at me, Conan!” She threw wide her arms. “I am Bêlit, queen of the black coast. Oh, tiger of the North, you are cold as the snowy mountains which bred you. Take me and crush me with your fierce love! Go with me to the ends of the earth and the ends of the sea! I am a queen by fire and steel and slaughter – be thou my king!”

His eyes swept the blood-stained ranks, seeking expressions of wrath or jealousy. He saw none.

The fury was gone from the ebon faces. He realized that to these men Bêlit was more than a woman: a goddess whose will was unquestioned. He glanced at the *Argus*, wallowing in the crimson sea-wash, heeling far over, her decks awash, held up by the grappling-irons. He glanced at the blue-fringed shore, at the far green hazes of the ocean, at the vibrant figure which stood before him; and his barbaric soul stirred within him. To quest these shining blue realms with that white-skinned young tiger-cat – to love, laugh, wander and pillage –

“I’ll sail with you,” he grunted, shaking the red drops from his blade.

“Ho, N’Yaga!” her voice twanged like a bowstring. “Fetch herbs and dress your master’s wounds! The rest of you bring aboard the plunder and cast off.”

As Conan sat with his back against the poop-rail, while the old shaman attended to the cuts on his hands and limbs, the cargo of the ill-fated *Argus* was quickly shifted aboard the *Tigress* and stored in small cabins below deck. Bodies of the crew and of fallen pirates were cast overboard to the swarming sharks, while wounded blacks were laid in the waist to be bandaged. Then the grappling-irons were cast off, and as the *Argus* sank silently into the blood-flecked waters, the *Tigress* moved off southward to the rhythmic clack of the oars.

As they moved out over the glassy blue deep, Bêlit came to the poop. Her eyes were burning like those of a she-panther in the dark as she tore off her ornaments, her sandals and her silken 128

girdle and cast them at his feet. Rising on tiptoe, arms stretched upward, a quivering line of naked white, she cried to the desperate horde: “Wolves of the blue sea, behold ye now the dance – the mating-dance of Bêlit, whose fathers were kings of Askalon!”

And she danced, like the spin of a desert whirlwind, like the leaping of a quenchless flame, like the urge of creation and the urge of death. Her white feet spurned the blood-stained deck and dying men forgot death as they gazed frozen at her. Then, as the white stars glimmered through the blue velvet dusk, making her whirling body a blur of ivory fire, with a wild cry she threw herself at Conan’s feet, and the blind flood of the Cimmerian’s desire swept all else away as he crushed her panting form against the black plates of his corseleted breast.

II

THE BLACK LOTUS

In that dead citadel of crumbling stone

Her eyes were snared by that unholy sheen,

And curious madness took me by the throat,

As of a rival lover thrust between.

– The Song of Bêlit.

The *Tigress* ranged the sea, and the black villages shuddered. Tom-toms beat in the night, with a tale that the she-devil of the sea had found a mate, an iron man whose wrath was as that of a wounded lion. And survivors of butchered Stygian ships named Bêlit with curse, and a white warrior with fierce blue eyes; so the Stygian princes remembered this man long and long, and their memory was a bitter tree which bore crimson fruit in the years to come.

But heedless as a vagrant wind, the *Tigress* cruised the southern coasts, until she anchored at the mouth of a broad sullen river, whose banks were jungle-clouded walls of mystery.

“This is the river Zarkheba, which is Death,” said Bêlit. “Its waters are poisonous. See how dark and murky they run? Only venomous reptiles live in that river. The black people shun it.

Once a Stygian galley, fleeing from me, fled up the river and vanished. I anchored in this very spot, and days later, the galley came floating down the dark waters, its decks blood-stained and deserted. Only one man was on board, and he was mad and died gibbering. The cargo was intact, but the crew had vanished into silence and mystery.

“My lover, I believe there is a city somewhere on that river. I have heard tales of giant towers 129

and walls glimpsed afar off by sailors who dared go part-way up the river. We fear nothing: Conan, let us go and sack that city!”

Conan agreed. He generally agreed to her plans. Hers was the mind that directed their raids, his the arm that carried out her ideas. It mattered little to him where they sailed or whom they fought, so long as they sailed and fought. He found the life good.

Battle and raid had thinned their crew; only some eighty spearmen remained, scarcely enough to work the long galley. But Bêlit would not take the time to make the long cruise southward to the island kingdoms where she recruited her buccaneers. She was afire with eagerness for her latest venture; so the *Tigress* swung into the river-mouth, the oarsmen pulling strongly as she

breasted the broad current.

They rounded the mysterious bend that shut out the sight of the sea, and sunset found them forging steadily against the sluggish flow, avoiding sand bars where strange reptiles coiled. Not even a crocodile did they see, nor any four-legged beast or winged bird coming down to the water's edge to drink. On through the blackness that preceded moonrise they drove, between banks that were solid palisades of darkness, whence came mysterious rustlings and stealthy footfalls, and the gleam of grim eyes. And once an inhuman voice was lifted in awful mockery

– the cry of an ape, Bêlit said, adding that the souls of evil men were imprisoned in these manlike animals as punishment for past crimes. But Conan doubted, for once, in a gold-barred cage in an Hyrkanian city, he had seen an abysmal sad-eyed beast which men told him was an ape, and there had been about it naught of the demoniac malevolence which vibrated in the shrieking laughter that echoed from the black jungle.

Then the moon rose, a splash of blood, ebony-barred, and the jungle awoke in horrific bedlam to greet it. Roars and howls and yells set the black warriors to trembling, but all this noise, Conan noted, came from farther back in the jungle, as if the beasts no less than men shunned the black waters of Zarkheba.

Rising above the black denseness of the trees and above the waving fronds, the moon silvered the river, and their wake became a rippling scintillation of phosphorescent bubbles that widened like a shining road of bursting jewels. The oars dipped into the shining water and came up sheathed in frosty silver. The plumes on the warriors' head-pieces nodded in the wind, and the gems on sword-hilts and harness sparkled frostily.

The cold light struck icy fire from the jewels in Bêlit's clustered black locks as she stretched her lithe figure on a leopardskin thrown on the deck. Supported on her elbows, her chin resting on her slim hands, she gazed up into the face of Conan, who lounged beside her, his black mane stirring in the faint breeze. Bêlit's eyes were dark jewels burning in the moonlight.

"Mystery and terror are about us, Conan, and we glide into the realm of horror and death," she 130

said. "Are you afraid?"

A shrug of his mailed shoulders was his only answer.

“I am not afraid either,” she said meditatively. “I was never afraid. I have looked into the naked fangs of Death too often. Conan, do you fear the gods?”

“I would not tread on their shadow,” answered the barbarian conservatively. “Some gods are strong to harm, others, to aid; at least so say their priests. Mitra of the Hyborians must be a strong god, because his people have builded their cities over the world. But even the Hyborians fear Set. And Bel, god of thieves, is a good god. When I was a thief in Zamora I learned of him.”

“What of your own gods? I have never heard you call on them.”

“Their chief is Crom. He dwells on a great mountain. What use to call on him? Little he cares if men live or die. Better to be silent than to call his attention to you; he will send you dooms, not fortune! He is grim and loveless, but at birth he breathes power to strive and slay into a man’s soul. What else shall men ask of the gods?”

“But what of the worlds beyond the river of death?” she persisted.

“There is no hope here or hereafter in the cult of my people,” answered Conan. “In this world men struggle and suffer vainly, finding pleasure only in the bright madness of battle; dying, their souls enter a gray misty realm of clouds and icy winds, to wander cheerlessly throughout eternity.”

Bêlit shuddered. “Life, bad as it is, is better than such a destiny. What do you believe, Conan?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “I have known many gods. He who denies them is as blind as he who trusts them too deeply. I seek not beyond death. It may be the blackness averred by the Nemedian skeptics, or Crom’s realm of ice and cloud, or the snowy plains and vaulted halls of the Nordheimer’s Valhalla. I know not, nor do I care. Let me live deep while I live; let me know the rich juices of red meat and stinging wine on my palate, the hot embrace of white arms, the mad exultation of battle when the blue blades flame and crimson, and I am content.

Let teachers and priests and philosophers brood over questions of reality and illusion. I know this: if life is illusion, then I am no less an illusion, and being thus, the illusion is real to me. I live, I burn with life, I love, I slay, and am content.”

“But the gods are real,” she said, pursuing her own line of thought. “And above all are the gods of the Shemites – Ishtar and Ashtoreth and Derketo and Adonis. Bel, too, is Shemitish, for he 131

The Coming of Conan The Cimmerian

was born in ancient Shumir, long, long ago, and went forth laughing, with curled beard and impish wise eyes, to steal the gems of the kings of old times.

“There is life beyond death, I know, and I know this, too, Conan of Cimmeria” – she rose lithely to her knees and caught him in a pantherish embrace – “my love is stronger than any death! I have lain in your arms, panting with the violence of our love; you have held and crushed and conquered me, drawing my soul to your lips with the fierceness of your bruising kisses. My heart is welded to your heart, my soul is part of your soul! Were I still in death and you fighting for life, I would come back from the abyss to aid you – aye, whether my spirit floated with the purple sails on the crystal sea of paradise, or writhed in the molten flames of hell! I am yours, and all the gods and all their eternities shall not sever us!”

A scream rang from the lookout in the bows. Thrusting Bêlit aside, Conan bounded up, his sword a long silver glitter in the moonlight, his hair bristling at what he saw. The black warrior dangled above the deck, supported by what seemed a dark pliant tree trunk arching over the rail. Then he realized that it was a gigantic serpent which had writhed its glistening length up the side of the bow and gripped the luckless warrior in its jaws. Its dripping scales shone leprously in the moonlight as it reared its form high above the deck, while the stricken man screamed and writhed like a mouse in the fangs of a python. Conan rushed into the bows, and swinging his great sword, hewed nearly through the giant trunk, which was thicker than a man’s body. Blood drenched the rails as the dying monster swayed far out, still gripping its victim, and sank into the river, coil by coil, lashing the water to bloody foam, in which man and reptile vanished together.

Thereafter Conan kept the lookout watch himself, but no other horror came crawling up from the murky depths, and as dawn whitened over the jungle, he sighted the black fangs of towers jutting up among the trees. He called Bêlit, who slept on the deck, wrapped in his scarlet cloak, and she sprang to his side, eyes blazing. Her lips were parted to call orders to her warriors to take up bow and spears; then her lovely eyes widened.

It was but the ghost of a city on which they looked when they cleared a jutting jungle-clad point and swung in toward the in-curving shore. Weeds and rank

river grass grew between the stones of broken piers and shattered paves that had once been streets and spacious plazas and broad courts. From all sides except that toward the river, the jungle crept in, masking fallen columns and crumbling mounds with poisonous green. Here and there buckling towers reeled drunkenly against the morning sky, and broken pillars jutted up among the decaying walls. In the center space a marble pyramid was spired by a slim column, and on its pinnacle sat or squatted something that Conan supposed to be an image until his keen eyes detected life in it.

“It is a great bird,” said one of the warriors, standing in the bows.

“It is a monster bat,” insisted another.

“It is an ape,” said Bêlit.

Just then the creature spread broad wings and flapped off into the jungle.

“A winged ape,” said old N’Yaga uneasily. “Better we had cut our throats than come to this place. It is haunted.”

Bêlit mocked at his superstitions and ordered the galley run inshore and tied to the crumbling wharfs. She was the first to spring ashore, closely followed by Conan, and after them trooped the ebon-skinned pirates, white plumes waving in the morning wind, spears ready, eyes rolling dubiously at the surrounding jungle.

Over all brooded a silence as sinister as that of a sleeping serpent. Bêlit posed picturesquely among the ruins, the vibrant life in her lithe figure contrasting strangely with the desolation and decay about her. The sun flamed up slowly, sullenly, above the jungle, flooding the towers with a dull gold that left shadows lurking beneath the tottering walls. Bêlit pointed to a slim round tower that reeled on its rotting base. A broad expanse of cracked, grass-grown slabs led up to it, flanked by fallen columns, and before it stood a massive altar. Bêlit went swiftly along the ancient floor and stood before it.

“This was the temple of the old ones,” she said. “Look – you can see the channels for the blood along the sides of the altar, and the rains of ten thousand years have not washed the dark stains from them. The walls have all fallen away, but this stone block defies time and the elements.”

“But who were these old ones?” demanded Conan.

She spread her slim hands helplessly. “Not even in legendry is this city mentioned. But look at the handholes at either end of the altar! Priests often conceal their treasures beneath their altars.

Four of you lay hold and see if you can lift it.”

She stepped back to make room for them, glancing up at the tower which loomed drunkenly above them. Three of the strongest blacks had gripped the handholds cut into the stone –

curiously unsuited to human hands – when Bêlit sprang back with a sharp cry. They froze in their places, and Conan, bending to aid them, wheeled with a startled curse.

“A snake in the grass,” she said, backing away. “Come and slay it; the rest of you bend your backs to the stone.”

Conan came quickly toward her, another taking his place. As he impatiently scanned the grass for the reptile, the giant blacks braced their feet, grunted and heaved with their huge muscles coiling and straining under their ebon skin. The altar did not come off the ground, but it revolved suddenly on its side. And simultaneously there was a grinding rumble above and the tower came crashing down, covering the four black men with broken masonry.

A cry of horror rose from their comrades. Bêlit’s slim fingers dug into Conan’s arm-muscles.

“There was no serpent,” she whispered. “It was but a ruse to call you away. I feared; the old ones guarded their treasure well. Let us clear away the stones.”

With herculean labor they did so, and lifted out the mangled bodies of the four men. And under them, stained with their blood, the pirates found a crypt carved in the solid stone. The altar, hinged curiously with stone rods and sockets on one side, had served as its lid. And at first glance the crypt seemed brimming with liquid fire, catching the early light with a million blazing facets. Undreamable wealth lay before the eyes of the gaping pirates: diamonds, rubies, bloodstones, sapphires, turquoises, moonstones, opals,

emeralds, amethysts, unknown gems that shone like the eyes of evil women. The crypt was filled to the brim with bright stones that the morning sun struck into lambent flame.

With a cry Bêlit dropped to her knees among the blood-stained rubble on the brink and thrust her white arms shoulder-deep into that pool of splendor. She withdrew them, clutching something that brought another cry to her lips – a long string of crimson stones that were like clots of frozen blood strung on a thick gold wire. In their glow the golden sunlight changed to bloody haze.

Bêlit's eyes were like a woman's in a trance. The Shemite soul finds a bright drunkenness in riches and material splendor, and the sight of this treasure might have shaken the soul of a sated emperor of Shushan.

"Take up the jewels, dogs!" her voice was shrill with her emotions.

"Look!" A muscular black arm stabbed toward the *Tigress*, and Bêlit wheeled, her crimson lips a-snarl, as if she expected to see a rival corsair sweeping in to despoil her of her plunder. But from the gunwales of the ship a dark shape rose, soaring away over the jungle.

"The devil-ape has been investigating the ship," muttered the blacks uneasily.

"What matter?" cried Bêlit with a curse, raking back a rebellious lock with an impatient hand.

"Make a litter of spears and mantles to bear these jewels – where the devil are you going?"

"To look to the galley," grunted Conan. "That bat-thing might have knocked a hole in the bottom, for all we know."

He ran swiftly down the cracked wharf and sprang aboard. A moment's swift examination below decks, and he swore heartily, casting a clouded glance in the direction the bat-being had vanished. He returned hastily to Bêlit, superintending the plundering of the crypt. She had looped the necklace about her neck, and on her naked white bosom the red clots glimmered darkly. A huge naked black stood crotch-deep in the jewel-brimming crypt, scooping up great handfuls of splendor to pass them to the eager hands above. Strings of

frozen iridescence hung between his dusky fingers; drops of red fire dripped from his hands, piled high with starlight and rainbow. It was as if a black titan stood straddle-legged in the bright pits of hell, his lifted hands full of stars.

“That flying devil has staved in the water-casks,” said Conan. “If we hadn’t been so dazed by these stones we’d have heard the noise. We were fools not to have left a man on guard. We can’t drink this river water. I’ll take twenty men and search for fresh water in the jungle.”

She looked at him vaguely, in her eyes the blank blaze of her strange passion, her fingers working at the gems on her breast.

“Very well,” she said absently, hardly heeding him. “I’ll get the loot aboard.”

The jungle closed quickly about them, changing the light from gold to gray. From the arching green branches creepers dangled like pythons. The warriors fell into single file, creeping through the primordial twilights like black phantoms following a white ghost.

Underbrush was not so thick as Conan had anticipated. The ground was spongy but not slushy.

Away from the river, it sloped gradually upward. Deeper and deeper they plunged into the green waving depths, and still there was no sign of water, either running stream or stagnant pool. Conan halted suddenly, his warriors freezing into basaltic statues. In the tense silence that followed, the Cimmerian shook his head irritably.

“Go ahead,” he grunted to a sub-chief, N’Gora. “March straight on until you can no longer see me; then stop and wait for me. I believe we’re being followed. I heard something.”

The blacks shuffled their feet uneasily, but did as they were told. As they swung onward, Conan stepped quickly behind a great tree, glaring back along the way they had come. From that leafy fastness anything might emerge. Nothing occurred; the faint sounds of the marching spearmen faded in the distance. Conan suddenly realized that the air was impregnated with an 135

alien and exotic scent. Something gently brushed his temple. He turned quickly. From a cluster of green, curiously leafed stalks, great black blossoms nodded at him. One of these had touched him. They seemed to beckon him, to

arch their pliant stems toward him. They spread and rustled, though no wind blew.

He recoiled, recognizing the black lotus, whose juice was death, and whose scent brought dream-haunted slumber. But already he felt a subtle lethargy stealing over him. He sought to lift his sword, to hew down the serpentine stalks, but his arm hung lifeless at his side. He opened his mouth to shout to his warriors, but only a faint rattle issued. The next instant, with appalling suddenness, the jungle waved and dimmed out before his eyes; he did not hear the screams that burst out awfully not far away, as his knees collapsed, letting him pitch limply to the earth. Above his prostrate form the great black blossoms nodded in the windless air.

III

THE HORROR IN THE JUNGLE

Was it a dream the nighted lotus brought?

Then curst the dream that bought my sluggish life;

And curst each laggard hour that does not see

Hot blood drip blackly from the crimsoned knife.

– The Song of Bêlit.

First there was the blackness of an utter void, with the cold winds of cosmic space blowing through it. Then shapes, vague, monstrous and evanescent, rolled in dim panorama through the expanse of nothingness, as if the darkness were taking material form. The winds blew and a vortex formed, a whirling pyramid of roaring blackness. From it grew Shape and Dimension; then suddenly, like clouds dispersing, the darkness rolled away on either hand and a huge city of dark green stone rose on the bank of a wide river, flowing through an illimitable plain.

Through this city moved beings of alien configuration.

Cast in the mold of humanity, they were distinctly not men. They were winged and of heroic proportions; not a branch on the mysterious stalk of evolution that culminated in man, but the ripe blossom on an alien tree, separate and apart from that stalk. Aside from their wings, in physical appearance they resembled man only as man in his highest form resembles

the great apes. In spiritual, esthetic and intellectual development they were superior to man as man is superior to the gorilla. But when they reared their colossal city, man's primal ancestors had not yet risen from the slime of the primordial seas.

These beings were mortal, as are all things built of flesh and blood. They lived, loved, and died, though the individual span of life was enormous. Then, after uncounted millions of years, the Change began. The vista shimmered and wavered, like a picture thrown on a wind-blown curtain. Over the city and the land the ages flowed as waves flow over a beach, and each wave brought alterations. Somewhere on the planet the magnetic centers were shifting; the great glaciers and ice-fields were withdrawing toward the new poles.

The littoral of the great river altered. Plains turned into swamps that stank with reptilian life.

Where fertile meadows had rolled, forests reared up, growing into dank jungles. The changing ages wrought on the inhabitants of the city as well. They did not migrate to fresher lands.

Reasons inexplicable to humanity held them to the ancient city and their doom. And as that once rich and mighty land sank deeper and deeper into the black mire of the sunless jungle, so into the chaos of squalling jungle life sank the people of the city. Terrific convulsions shook the earth; the nights were lurid with spouting volcanoes that fringed the dark horizons with red pillars.

After an earthquake that shook down the outer walls and highest towers of the city, and caused the river to run black for days with some lethal substance spewed up from the subterranean depths, a frightful chemical change became apparent in the waters the folk had drunk for millenniums uncountable.

Many died who drank of it; and in those who lived, the drinking wrought change, subtle, gradual and grisly. In adapting themselves to the changing conditions, they had sunk far below their original level. But the lethal waters altered them even more horribly, from generation to more bestial generation. They who had been winged gods became pinioned demons, with all that remained of their ancestors' vast knowledge distorted and perverted and twisted into ghastly paths. As they had risen higher than mankind might dream, so they sank lower than man's maddest nightmares reach. They died

fast, by cannibalism, and horrible feuds fought out in the murk of the midnight jungle. And at last among the lichen-grown ruins of their city only a single shape lurked, a stunted abhorrent perversion of nature.

Then for the first time humans appeared: dark-skinned, hawk-faced men in copper and leather harness, bearing bows – the warriors of pre-historic Stygia. There were only fifty of them, and they were haggard and gaunt with starvation and prolonged effort, stained and scratched with jungle-wandering, with blood-crusted bandages that told of fierce fighting. In their minds was a tale of warfare and defeat, and flight before a stronger tribe which drove them ever southward, until they lost themselves in the green ocean of jungle and river.

Exhausted they lay down among the ruins where red blossoms that bloom but once in a century waved in the full moon, and sleep fell upon them. And as they slept, a hideous shape crept red-eyed from the shadows and performed weird and awful rites about and above each sleeper. The moon hung in the shadowy sky, painting the jungle red and black; above the sleepers 137

glimmered the crimson blossoms, like splashes of blood. Then the moon went down and the eyes of the necromancer were red jewels set in the ebony of night.

When dawn spread its white veil over the river, there were no men to be seen: only a hairy winged horror that squatted in the center of a ring of fifty great spotted hyenas that pointed quivering muzzles to the ghastly sky and howled like souls in hell.

Then scene followed scene so swiftly that each tripped over the heels of its predecessor. There was a confusion of movement, a writhing and melting of lights and shadows, against a background of black jungle, green stone ruins, and murky river. Black men came up the river in long boats with skulls grinning on the prows, or stole stooping through the trees, spear in hand.

They fled screaming through the dark from red eyes and slavering fangs. Howls of dying men shook the shadows; stealthy feet padded through the gloom, vampire eyes blazed redly. There were grisly feasts beneath the moon, across whose red disk a bat-like shadow incessantly swept.

Then abruptly, etched clearly in contrast to these impressionistic glimpses, around the jungled point in the whitening dawn swept a long galley, thronged

with shining ebon figures, and in the bows stood a white-skinned giant in blue steel.

It was at this point that Conan first realized that he was dreaming. Until that instant he had had no consciousness of individual existence. But as he saw himself treading the boards of the *Tigress*, he recognized both the existence and the dream, although he did not awaken.

Even as he wondered, the scene shifted abruptly to a jungle glade where N'Gora and nineteen black spearmen stood, as if awaiting someone. Even as he realized that it was he for whom they waited, a horror swooped down from the skies and their stolidity was broken by yells of fear.

Like men maddened by terror, they threw away their weapons and raced wildly through the jungle, pressed close by the slavering monstrosity that flapped its wings above them.

Chaos and confusion followed this vision, during which Conan feebly struggled to awake.

Dimly he seemed to see himself lying under a nodding cluster of black blossoms, while from the bushes a hideous shape crept toward him. With a savage effort he broke the unseen bonds which held him to his dreams, and started upright.

Bewilderment was in the glare he cast about him. Near him swayed the dusky lotus, and he hastened to draw away from it.

In the spongy soil near by there was a track as if an animal had put out a foot, preparatory to 138

emerging from the bushes, then had withdrawn it. It looked like the spoor of an unbelievably large hyena.

He yelled for N'Gora. Primordial silence brooded over the jungle, in which his yells sounded brittle and hollow as mockery. He could not see the sun, but his wilderness-trained instinct told him the day was near its end. A panic rose in him at the thought that he had lain senseless for hours. He hastily followed the tracks of the spearmen, which lay plain in the damp loam before him. They ran in single file, and he soon emerged into a glade – to stop short, the skin crawling between his shoulders as he recognized it as the glade he had

seen in his lotus-drugged dream.

Shields and spears lay scattered about as if dropped in headlong flight.

And from the tracks which led out of the glade and deeper into the fastnesses, Conan knew that the spearmen had fled, wildly. The footprints overlay one another; they weaved blindly among the trees. And with startling suddenness the hastening Cimmerian came out of the jungle onto a hill-like rock which sloped steeply, to break off abruptly in a sheer precipice forty feet high.

And something crouched on the brink.

At first Conan thought it to be a great black gorilla. Then he saw that it was a giant black man that crouched ape-like, long arms dangling, froth dripping from the loose lips. It was not until, with a sobbing cry, the creature lifted huge hands and rushed toward him, that Conan recognized N'Gora. The black man gave no heed to Conan's shout as he charged, eyes rolled up to display the whites, teeth gleaming, face an inhuman mask.

With his skin crawling with the horror that madness always instils in the sane, Conan passed his sword through the black man's body; then, avoiding the hooked hands that clawed at him as N'Gora sank down, he strode to the edge of the cliff.

For an instant he stood looking down into the jagged rocks below, where lay N'Gora's spearmen, in limp, distorted attitudes that told of crushed limbs and splintered bones. Not one moved. A cloud of huge black flies buzzed loudly above the blood-splashed stones; the ants had already begun to gnaw at the corpses. On the trees about sat birds of prey, and a jackal, looking up and seeing the man on the cliff, slunk furtively away.

For a little space Conan stood motionless. Then he wheeled and ran back the way he had come, flinging himself with reckless haste through the tall grass and bushes, hurdling creepers that sprawled snake-like across his path. His sword swung low in his right hand, and an unaccustomed pallor tinged his dark face.

The silence that reigned in the jungle was not broken. The sun had set and great shadows rushed upward from the slime of the black earth. Through the gigantic shades of lurking death and grim desolation Conan was a speeding glimmer of scarlet and blue steel. No sound in all the solitude was heard except his own quick panting as he burst from the shadows into the dim

twilight of the river-shore.

He saw the galley shouldering the rotten wharf, the ruins reeling drunkenly in the gray half-light.

And here and there among the stones were spots of raw bright color, as if a careless hand had splashed with a crimson brush.

Again Conan looked on death and destruction. Before him lay his spearmen, nor did they rise to salute him. From the jungle-edge to the river-bank, among the rotting pillars and along the broken piers they lay, torn and mangled and half-devoured, chewed travesties of men.

All about the bodies and pieces of bodies were swarms of huge footprints, like those of hyenas.

Conan came silently upon the pier, approaching the galley above whose deck was suspended something that glimmered ivory-white in the faint twilight. Speechless the Cimmerian looked on the Queen of the Black Coast as she hung from the yard-arm of her own galley. Between the yard and her white throat stretched a line of crimson clots that shone like blood in the gray light.

IV

THE ATTACK FROM THE AIR

The shadows were black around him,

The dripping jaws gaped wide,

Thicker than rain the red drops fell;

But my love was fiercer than Death's black spell,

Nor all the iron walls of hell

Could keep me from his side.

– The Song of Bêlit.

The jungle was a black colossus that locked the ruin-littered glade in ebon arms. The moon had not risen; the stars were flecks of hot amber in a

breathless sky that reeked of death. On the pyramid among the fallen towers sat Conan the Cimmerian like an iron statue, chin propped on massive fists. Out in the black shadows stealthy feet padded and red eyes glimmered. The dead lay as they had fallen. But on the deck of the *Tigress*, on a pyre of broken benches, spear-shafts 140

and leopardskins, lay the Queen of the Black Coast in her last sleep, wrapped in Conan's scarlet cloak. Like a true queen she lay, with her plunder heaped high about her: silks, cloth-ofgold, silver braid, casks of gems and golden coins, silver ingots, jeweled daggers, and teocallis of gold wedges.

But of the plunder of the accursed city, only the sullen waters of Zarkheba could tell, where Conan had thrown it with a heathen curse. Now he sat grimly on the pyramid, waiting for his unseen foes. The black fury in his soul drove out all fear. What shapes would emerge from the blackness he knew not, nor did he care.

He no longer doubted the visions of the black lotus. He understood that while waiting for him in the glade, N'Gora and his comrades had been terror-stricken by the winged monster swooping upon them from the sky, and fleeing in blind panic, had fallen over the cliff; all except their chief, who had somehow escaped their fate, though not madness. Meanwhile, or immediately after, or perhaps before, the destruction of those on the river-bank had been accomplished. Conan did not doubt that the slaughter along the river had been massacre rather than battle. Already unmanned by their superstitious fears, the blacks might well have died without striking a blow in their own defense when attacked by their inhuman foes.

Why he had been spared so long, he did not understand, unless the malign entity which ruled the river meant to keep him alive to torture him with grief and fear. All pointed to a human or superhuman intelligence – the breaking of the water-casks to divide the forces, the driving of the blacks over the cliff, and last and greatest, the grim jest of the crimson necklace knotted like a hangman's noose about Bêlit's white neck.

Having apparently saved the Cimmerian for the choicest victim, and extracted the last ounce of exquisite mental torture, it was likely that the unknown enemy would conclude the drama by sending him after the other victims. No smile bent Conan's grim lips at the thought, but his eyes were lit with iron laughter.

The moon rose, striking fire from the Cimmerian's horned helmet. No call awoke the echoes; yet suddenly the night grew tense and the jungle held its breath. Instinctively Conan loosened the great sword in its sheath. The pyramid on which he rested was four-sided, one – the side toward the jungle – carved in broad steps. In his hand was a Shemite bow, such as Bêlit had taught her pirates to use. A heap of arrows lay at his feet, feathered ends toward him, as he rested on one knee.

Something moved in the blackness under the trees. Etched abruptly in the rising moon, Conan saw a darkly blocked-out head and shoulders, brutish in outline. And now from the shadows dark shapes came silently, swiftly, running low—twenty great spotted hyenas. Their slavering fangs flashed in the moonlight, their eyes blazed as no true beast's eyes ever blazed.

Twenty: then the spears of the pirates had taken toll of the pack, after all. Even as he thought this, Conan drew nock to ear, and at the twang of the string a flame-eyed shadow bounded high and fell writhing. The rest did not falter; on they came, and like a rain of death among them fell the arrows of the Cimmerian, driven with all the force and accuracy of steely thews backed by a hate hot as the slag-heaps of hell.

In his berserk fury he did not miss; the air was filled with feathered destruction. The havoc wrought among the onrushing pack was breath-taking. Less than half of them reached the foot of the pyramid. Others dropped upon the broad steps. Glaring down into the blazing eyes, Conan knew these creatures were not beasts; it was not merely in their unnatural size that he sensed a blasphemous difference. They exuded an aura tangible as the black mist rising from a corpse-littered swamp. By what godless alchemy these beings had been brought into existence, he could not guess; but he knew he faced diabolism blacker than the Well of Skelos.

Springing to his feet, he bent his bow powerfully and drove his last shaft point-blank at a great hairy shape that soared up at his throat. The arrow was a flying beam of moonlight that flashed onward with but a blur in its course, but the were-beast plunged convulsively in midair and crashed headlong, shot through and through.

Then the rest were on him, in a nightmare rush of blazing eyes and dripping fangs. His fiercely driven sword shore the first asunder; then the desperate

impact of the others bore him down. He crushed a narrow skull with the pommel of his hilt, feeling the bone splinter and blood and brains gush over his hand; then, dropping the sword, useless at such deadly-close quarters, he caught at the throats of the two horrors which were ripping and tearing at him in silent fury. A foul acrid scent almost stifled him, his own sweat blinded him. Only his mail saved him from being ripped to ribbons in an instant. The next, his naked right hand locked on a hairy throat and tore it open. His left hand, missing the throat of the other beast, caught and broke its foreleg. A short yelp, the only cry in that grim battle, and hideously human-like, burst from the maimed beast. At the sick horror of that cry from a bestial throat, Conan involuntarily relaxed his grip.

One, blood gushing from its torn jugular, lunged at him in a last spasm of ferocity, and fastened its fangs on his throat – to fall back dead, even as Conan felt the tearing agony of its grip.

The other, springing forward on three legs, was slashing at his belly as a wolf slashes, actually rending the links of his mail. Flinging aside the dying beast, Conan grappled the crippled horror and with a muscular effort that brought a groan from his blood-flecked lips, he heaved upright, gripping the struggling, tearing fiend in his arms. An instant he reeled off balance, its fetid breath hot on his nostrils, its jaws snapping at his neck; then he hurled it from him, to crash with bone-splintering force down the marble steps.

As he reeled on wide-braced legs, sobbing for breath, the jungle and the moon swimming 142

bloodily to his sight, the thrash of bat-wings was loud in his ears. Stooping, he groped for his sword, and swaying upright, braced his feet drunkenly and heaved the great blade above his head with both hands, shaking the blood from his eyes as he sought the air above him for his foe.

Instead of attack from the air, the pyramid staggered suddenly and awfully beneath his feet. He heard a rumbling crackle and saw the tall column above him wave like a wand. Stung to galvanized life, he bounded far out; his feet hit a step, half-way down, which rocked beneath him, and his next desperate leap carried him clear. But even as his heels hit the earth, with a shattering crash like a breaking mountain the pyramid crumpled, the column came thundering down in bursting fragments. For a blind cataclysmic instant the sky seemed to rain shards of marble. Then a rubble of shattered stone lay whitely under the moon.

Conan stirred, throwing off the splinters that half covered him. A glancing blow had knocked off his helmet and momentarily stunned him. Across his legs lay a great piece of the column, pinning him down. He was not sure that his legs were unbroken. His black locks were plastered with sweat; blood trickled from the wounds in his throat and hands. He hitched up on one arm, struggling with the debris that prisoned him.

Then something swept down across the stars and struck the sward near him. Twisting about, he saw it – *the winged one!*

With fearful speed it was rushing upon him, and in that instant Conan had only a confused impression of a gigantic man-like shape hurtling along on bowed and stunted legs; of huge hairy arms outstretching misshapen black-nailed paws; of a malformed head, in whose broad face the only features recognizable as such were a pair of blood-red eyes. It was a thing neither man, beast, nor devil, imbued with characteristics subhuman as well as characteristics superhuman.

But Conan had no time for conscious consecutive thought. He threw himself toward his fallen sword, and his clawing fingers missed it by inches. Desperately he grasped the shard which pinned his legs, and the veins swelled in his temples as he strove to thrust it off him. It gave slowly, but he knew that before he could free himself the monster would be upon him, and he knew that those black-taloned hands were death.

The headlong rush of the winged one had not wavered. It towered over the prostrate Cimmerian like a black shadow, arms thrown wide – a glimmer of white flashed between it and its victim.

In one mad instant she was there – a tense white shape, vibrant with love fierce as a she-panther’s. The dazed Cimmerian saw between him and the onrushing death, her lithe figure, shimmering like ivory beneath the moon; he saw the blaze of her dark eyes, the thick cluster of her burnished hair; her bosom heaved, her red lips were parted, she cried out sharp and ringing as the ring of steel as she thrust at the winged monster’s breast.

“Bêlit!” screamed Conan. She flashed a quick glance toward him, and in her dark eyes he saw her love flaming, a naked elemental thing of raw fire and

molten lava. Then she was gone, and the Cimmerian saw only the winged fiend which had staggered back in unwonted fear, arms lifted as if to fend off attack. And he knew that Bêlit in truth lay on her pyre on the *Tigress'*

deck. In his ears rang her passionate cry: "Were I still in death and you fighting for life I would come back from the abyss –"

With a terrible cry he heaved upward, hurling the stone aside. The winged one came on again, and Conan sprang to meet it, his veins on fire with madness. The thews started out like cords on his forearms as he swung his great sword, pivoting on his heel with the force of the sweeping arc. Just above the hips it caught the hurtling shape, and the knotted legs fell one way, the torso another as the blade sheared clear through its hairy body.

Conan stood in the moonlit silence, the dripping sword sagging in his hand, staring down at the remnants of his enemy. The red eyes glared up at him with awful life, then glazed and set; the great hands knotted spasmodically and stiffened. And the oldest race in the world was extinct.

Conan lifted his head, mechanically searching for the beast-things that had been its slaves and executioners. None met his gaze. The bodies he saw littering the moon-splashed grass were of men, not beasts: hawk-faced, dark-skinned men, naked, transfixed by arrows or mangled by sword-strokes. And they were crumbling into dust before his eyes.

Why had not the winged master come to the aid of its slaves when he struggled with them?

Had it feared to come within reach of fangs that might turn and rend it? Craft and caution had lurked in that misshapen skull, but had not availed in the end.

Turning on his heel, the Cimmerian strode down the rotting wharfs and stepped aboard the galley. A few strokes of his sword cut her adrift, and he went to the sweep-head. The *Tigress* rocked slowly in the sullen water, sliding out sluggishly toward the middle of the river, until the broad current caught her. Conan leaned on the sweep, his somber gaze fixed on the cloak-wrapped shape that lay in state on the pyre the richness of which was equal to the ransom of an empress.

V

THE FUNERAL PYRE

Now we are done with roaming, evermore;

No more the oars, the windy harp's refrain;

Nor crimson pennon frights the dusky shore;

Blue girdle of the world, receive again

Her whom thou gavest me.

– The Song of Bêlit.

Again dawn tinged the ocean. A redder glow lit the river-mouth. Conan of Cimmeria leaned on his great sword upon the white beach, watching the *Tigress* swinging out on her last voyage.

There was no light in his eyes that contemplated the glassy swells. Out of the rolling blue wastes all glory and wonder had gone. A fierce revulsion shook him as he gazed at the green surges that deepened into purple hazes of mystery.

Bêlit had been of the sea; she had lent it splendor and allure. Without her it rolled a barren, dreary and desolate waste from pole to pole. She belonged to the sea; to its everlasting mystery he returned her. He could do no more. For himself, its glittering blue splendor was more repellent than the leafy fronds which rustled and whispered behind him of vast mysterious wilds beyond them, and into which he must plunge.

No hand was at the sweep of the *Tigress*, no oars drove her through the green water. But a clean tanging wind bellied her silken sail, and as a wild swan cleaves the sky to her nest, she sped seaward, flames mounting higher and higher from her deck to lick at the mast and envelop the figure that lay lapped in scarlet on the shining pyre.

So passed the Queen of the Black Coast, and leaning on his red-stained sword, Conan stood silently until the red glow had faded far out in the blue hazes and dawn splashed its rose and gold over the ocean.

The Coming of Conan The Cimmerian

Black Colossus

Black Colossus

"*The Night of Power, when Fate stalked through the corridors of the world like a colossus just risen from an age-old throne of granite –"*

E. Hoffmann Price: The Girl From Samarcand.

Only the age-old silence brooded over the mysterious ruins of Kuthchemes, but Fear was there; Fear quivered in the mind of Shevatas, the thief, driving his breath quick and sharp against his clenched teeth.

He stood, the one atom of life amidst the colossal monuments of desolation and decay. Not even a vulture hung like a black dot in the vast blue vault of the sky that the sun glazed with its heat. On every hand rose the grim relics of another, forgotten age: huge broken pillars, thrusting up their jagged pinnacles into the sky; long wavering lines of crumbling walls; fallen cyclopean blocks of stone; shattered images, whose horrific features the corroding winds and dust-storms had half erased. From horizon to horizon no sign of life: only the sheer breathtaking sweep of the naked desert, bisected by the wandering line of a long-dry river-course; in the midst of that vastness the glimmering fangs of the ruins, the columns standing up like broken masts of sunken ships – all dominated by the towering ivory dome before which Shevatas stood trembling.

The base of this dome was a gigantic pedestal of marble rising from what had once been a terraced eminence on the banks of the ancient river. Broad steps led up to a great bronze door in the dome, which rested on its base like the half of some titanic egg. The dome itself was of pure ivory, which shone as if unknown hands kept it polished. Likewise shone the spired gold cap of the pinnacle, and the inscription which sprawled about the curve of the dome in golden hieroglyphics yards long. No man on earth could read those characters, but Shevatas shuddered at the dim conjectures they raised. For he came of a very old race, whose myths ran back to shapes undreamed of by contemporary tribes.

Shevatas was wiry and lithe, as became a master-thief of Zamora. His small round head was shaven, his only garment a loin-cloth of scarlet silk. Like all his race, he was very dark, his narrow vulture-like face set off by his keen black eyes. His long, slender and tapering fingers 146

were quick and nervous as the wings of a moth. From a gold-scaled girdle hung a short, narrow, jewel-hilted sword in a sheath of ornamented leather. Shevatas handled the weapon with apparently exaggerated care. He even seemed to flinch away from the contact of the sheath with his naked thigh. Nor was his care without reason.

This was Shevatas, a thief among thieves, whose name was spoken with awe in the dives of the Maul and the dim shadowy recesses beneath the temples of Bel, and who lived in songs and myths for a thousand years. Yet fear ate at the heart of Shevatas as he stood before the ivory dome of Kuthchemes. Any fool could see there was something unnatural about the structure; the winds and suns of three thousand years had lashed it, yet its gold and ivory rose bright and glistening as the day it was reared by nameless hands on the bank of the nameless river.

This unnaturalness was in keeping with the general aura of these devil-haunted ruins. This desert was the mysterious expanse lying southeast of the lands of Shem. A few days' ride on camel-back to the southwest, as Shevatas knew, would bring the traveller within sight of the great river Styx at the point where it turned at right angles with its former course, and flowed westward to empty at last into the distant sea. At the point of its bend began the land of Stygia, the dark-bosomed mistress of the south, whose domains, watered by the great river, rose sheer out of the surrounding desert.

Eastward, Shevatas knew, the desert shaded into steppes stretching to the Hyrcanian kingdom of Turan, rising in barbaric splendor on the shores of the great inland sea. A week's ride northward the desert ran into a tangle of barren hills, beyond which lay the fertile uplands of Koth, the southernmost realm of the Hyborian races. Westward the desert merged into the meadowlands of Shem, which stretched away to the ocean.

All this Shevatas knew without being particularly conscious of the knowledge, as a man knows the streets of his town. He was a far traveller and had looted the treasures of many kingdoms.

But now he hesitated and shuddered before the highest adventure and the mightiest treasure of all.

In that ivory dome lay the bones of Thugra Khotan, the dark sorcerer who had reigned in Kuthchemes three thousand years ago, when the kingdoms of Stygia stretched far northward of the great river, over the meadows of Shem,

and into the uplands. Then the great drift of the Hyborians swept southward from the cradle-land of their race near the northern pole. It was a titanic drift, extending over centuries and ages. But in the reign of Thugra Khotan, the last magician of Kuthchemes, gray-eyed, tawny-haired barbarians in wolfskins and scale-mail had ridden from the north into the rich uplands to carve out the kingdom of Koth with their iron swords. They had stormed over Kuthchemes like a tidal wave, washing the marble towers in blood, and the northern Stygian kingdom had gone down in fire and ruin.

But while they were shattering the streets of his city and cutting down his archers like ripe 147

corn, Thugra Khotan had swallowed a strange terrible poison, and his masked priests had locked him into the tomb he himself had prepared. His devotees died about that tomb in a crimson holocaust, but the barbarians could not burst the door, nor even mar the structure by maul or fire. So they rode away, leaving the great city in ruins, and in his ivory-domed sepulcher great Thugra Khotan slept unmolested, while the lizards of desolation gnawed at the crumbling pillars, and the very river that watered his land in old times sank into the sands and ran dry.

Many a thief sought to gain the treasure which fables said lay heaped about the moldering bones inside the dome. And many a thief died at the door of the tomb, and many another was harried by monstrous dreams to die at last with the froth of madness on his lips.

So Shevatas shuddered as he faced the tomb, nor was his shudder altogether occasioned by the legend of the serpent said to guard the sorcerer’s bones. Over all myths of Thugra Khotan hung horror and death like a pall. From where the thief stood he could see the ruins of the great hall wherein chained captives had knelt by the hundreds during festivals to have their heads hacked off by the priest-king in honor of Set, the Serpent-god of Stygia. Somewhere near by had been the pit, dark and awful, wherein screaming victims were fed to a nameless amorphic monstrosity which came up out of a deeper, more hellish cavern. Legend made Thugra Khotan more than human; his worship yet lingered in a mongrel degraded cult, whose votaries stamped his likeness on coins to pay the way of their dead over the great river of darkness of which the Styx was but the material shadow. Shevatas had seen this likeness, on coins stolen from under the tongues of the dead, and its image was etched indelibly in his brain.

But he put aside his fears and mounted to the bronze door, whose smooth surface offered no bolt or catch. Not for naught had he gained access into darksome cults, had harkened to the grisly whispers of the votaries of Skelos under midnight trees, and read the forbidden ironbound books of Vathelos the Blind.

Kneeling before the portal, he searched the sill with nimble fingers; their sensitive tips found projections too small for the eye to detect, or for less-skilled fingers to discover. These he pressed carefully and according to a peculiar system, muttering a long-forgotten incantation as he did so. As he pressed the last projection, he sprang up with frantic haste and struck the exact center of the door a quick sharp blow with his open hand.

There was no rasp of spring or hinge, but the door retreated inward, and the breath hissed explosively from Shevatas' clenched teeth. A short narrow corridor was disclosed. Down this the door had slid, and was now in place at the other end. The floor, ceiling and sides of the tunnel-like aperture were of ivory, and now from an opening on one side came a silent writhing horror that reared up and glared on the intruder with awful luminous eyes; a serpent twenty feet 148

long, with shimmering, iridescent scales.

The thief did not waste time in conjecturing what night-black pits lying below the dome had given sustenance to the monster. Gingerly he drew the sword, and from it dripped a greenish liquid exactly like that which slavered from the simitar-fangs of the reptile. The blade was steeped in the poison of the snake's own kind, and the obtaining of that venom from the fiend-haunted swamps of Zingara would have made a saga in itself.

Shevatas advanced warily on the balls of his feet, knees bent slightly, ready to spring either way like a flash of light. And he needed all his co-ordinate speed when the snake arched its neck and struck, shooting out its full length like a stroke of lightning. For all his quickness of nerve and eye, Shevatas had died then but for chance. His well-laid plans of leaping aside and striking down on the outstretched neck were put at naught by the blinding speed of the reptile's attack. The thief had but time to extend the sword in front of him, involuntarily closing his eyes and crying out. Then the sword was wrenched from his hand and the corridor was filled with a horrible thrashing and lashing.

Opening his eyes, amazed to find himself still alive, Shevatas saw the monster heaving and twisting its slimy form in fantastic contortions, the sword transfixing its giant jaws. Sheer chance had hurled it full against the point he had held out blindly. A few moments later the serpent sank into shining, scarcely quivering coils, as the poison on the blade struck home.

Gingerly stepping over it, the thief thrust against the door, which this time slid aside, revealing the interior of the dome. Shevatas cried out; instead of utter darkness he had come into a crimson light that throbbed and pulsed almost beyond the endurance of mortal eyes. It came from a gigantic red jewel high up in the vaulted arch of the dome. Shevatas gaped, inured though he was to the sight of riches. The treasure was there, heaped in staggering profusion –

piles of diamonds, sapphires, rubies, turquoises, opals, emeralds; ziggurats of jade, jet and lapis-lazuli; pyramids of gold wedges; teocallis of silver ingots; jewel-hilted swords in cloth-of-gold sheaths; golden helmets with colored horsehair crests, or black and scarlet plumes; silver-scaled corselets; gem-crusted harness worn by warrior-kings three thousand years in their tombs; goblets carven of single jewels; skulls plated with gold, with moonstones for eyes; necklaces of human teeth set with jewels. The ivory floor was covered inches deep with gold dust that sparkled and shimmered under the crimson glow with a million scintillant lights. The thief stood in a wonderland of magic and splendor, treading stars under his sandalled feet.

But his eyes were focussed on the dais of crystal which rose in the midst of the shimmering array, directly under the red jewel, and on which should be lying the moldering bones, turning to dust with the crawling of the centuries. And as Shevatas looked, the blood drained from his dark features; his marrow turned to ice, and the skin of his back crawled and wrinkled with horror, while his lips worked soundlessly. But suddenly he found his voice in one awful scream that rang hideously under the arching dome. Then again the silence of the ages lay among the 149

ruins of mysterious Kuthchemes.

II

Rumors drifted up through the meadowlands, into the cities of the Hyborians. The word ran along the caravans, the long camel-trains plodding through the sands, herded by lean hawk-eyed men in white kaftans. It was passed on by the hook-nosed herdsmen of the grasslands, from the dwellers in tents to the

dwellers in the squat stone cities where kings with curled blue-black beards worshipped round-bellied gods with curious rites. The word passed up through the fringe of hills where gaunt tribesmen took toll of the caravans. The rumors came into the fertile uplands where stately cities rose above blue lakes and rivers: the rumors marched along the broad white roads thronged with ox-wains, with lowing herds, with rich merchants, knights in steel, archers and priests.

They were rumors from the desert that lies east of Stygia, far south of the Kothian hills. A new prophet had risen among the nomads. Men spoke of tribal war, of a gathering of vultures in the southeast, and a terrible leader who led his swiftly increasing hordes to victory. The Stygians, ever a menace to the northern nations, were apparently not connected with this movement; for they were massing armies on their eastern borders and their priests were making magic to fight that of the desert sorcerer, whom men called Natohk, the Veiled One; for his features were always masked.

But the tide swept northwestward, and the blue-bearded kings died before the altars of their potbellied gods, and their squat-walled cities were drenched in blood. Men said that the uplands of the Hyborians were the goal of Natohk and his chanting votaries.

Raids from the desert were not uncommon, but this latest movement seemed to promise more than a raid. Rumor said Natohk had welded thirty nomadic tribes and fifteen cities into his following, and that a rebellious Stygian prince had joined him. This latter lent the affair an aspect of real war.

Characteristically most of the Hyborian nations were prone to ignore the growing menace. But in Khoraja, carved out of Shemite lands by the swords of Kothic adventurers, heed was given.

Lying southeast of Koth, it would bear the brunt of the invasion. And its young king was captive to the treacherous king of Ophir, who hesitated between restoring him for a huge ransom, or handing him over to his enemy, the penurious king of Koth, who offered no gold, but an advantageous treaty. Meanwhile, the rule of the struggling kingdom was in the white hands of young princess Yasmela, the king’s sister.

Minstrels sang her beauty throughout the western world, and the pride of a kingly dynasty was hers. But on that night her pride was dropped from her like a cloak. In her chamber whose ceiling was a lapis lazuli dome, whose marble floor was littered with rare furs, and whose walls 150

were lavish with golden frieze-work, ten girls, daughters of nobles, their slender limbs weighted with gem-crusted armlets and anklets, slumbered on velvet couches about the royal bed with its golden dais and silken canopy. But princess Yasmela lolled not on that silken bed.

She lay naked on her supple belly upon the bare marble like the most abased suppliant, her dark hair streaming over her white shoulders, her slender fingers intertwined. She lay and writhed in pure horror that froze the blood in her lithe limbs and dilated her beautiful eyes, that pricked the roots of her dark hair and made goose-flesh rise along her supple spine.

Above her, in the darkest corner of the marble chamber, lurked a vast shapeless shadow. It was no living thing of form or flesh and blood. It was a clot of darkness, a blur in the sight, a monstrous night-born incubus that might have been deemed a figment of a sleep-drugged brain, but for the points of blazing yellow fire that glimmered like two eyes from the blackness.

Moreover a voice issued from it – a low subtle inhuman sibilance that was more like the soft abominable hissing of a serpent than anything else, and that apparently could not emanate from anything with human lips. Its sound as well as its import filled Yasmela with a shuddering horror so intolerable that she writhed and twisted her slender body as if beneath a lash, as though to rid her mind of its insinuating vileness by physical contortion.

“You are marked for mine, princess,” came the gloating whisper. “Before I wakened from the long sleep I had marked you, and yearned for you, but I was held fast by the ancient spell by which I escaped mine enemies. I am the soul of Natohk, the Veiled One! Look well upon me, princess! Soon you shall behold me in my bodily guise, and shall love me!”

The ghostly hissing dwindled off in lustful titterings, and Yasmela moaned and beat the marble tiles with her small fists in her ecstasy of terror.

“I sleep in the palace chamber of Akbatana,” the sibilances continued. “There my body lies in its frame of bones and flesh. But it is but an empty shell from which the spirit has flown for a brief space. Could you gaze from that palace casement you would realize the futility of resistance. The desert is a rose-garden beneath the moon, where blossom the fires of a hundred thousand warriors. As an avalanche sweeps onward, gathering bulk and momentum, I will sweep into the lands of mine ancient enemies. Their kings shall furnish me skulls for goblets, their women and children shall be slaves of my slaves’

slaves. I have grown strong in the long years of dreaming….

“But thou shalt be my queen, oh princess! I will teach thee the ancient forgotten ways of pleasure. We –” Before the stream of cosmic obscenity which poured from the shadowy colossus, Yasmela cringed and writhed as if from a whip that flayed her dainty bare flesh.

“Remember!” whispered the horror. “The days will not be many before I come to claim mine own!”

Yasmela, pressing her face against the tiles and stopping her pink ears with her dainty fingers, yet seemed to hear a strange sweeping noise, like the beat of bat-wings. Then, looking fearfully up, she saw only the moon that shone through the window with a beam that rested like a silver sword across the spot where the phantom had lurked. Trembling in every limb, she rose and staggered to a satin couch, where she threw herself down, weeping hysterically. The girls slept on, but one, who roused, yawned, stretched her slender figure and blinked about. Instantly she was on her knees beside the couch, her arms about Yasmela’s supple waist.

“Was it – was it – ?” her dark eyes were wide with fright. Yasmela caught her in a convulsive grasp.

“Oh, Vateesa, *It* came again! I saw It – heard It speak! It spoke Its name – Natohk! It is Natohk! It is not a nightmare – it towered over me while the girls slept like drugged ones. What

– oh, *what* shall I do?”

Vateesa twisted a golden bracelet about her rounded arm, in meditation.

“Oh, princess,” she said, “it is evident that no mortal power can deal with It, and the charm is useless that the priests of Ishtar gave you. Therefore seek you the forgotten oracle of Mitra.”

In spite of her recent fright, Yasmela shuddered. The gods of yesterday become the devils of tomorrow. The Kothians had long since abandoned the worship of Mitra, forgetting the attributes of the universal Hyborian god. Yasmela had a vague idea that, being very ancient, it followed that the deity

was very terrible. Ishtar was much to be feared, and all the gods of Koth. Kothian culture and religion had suffered from a subtle admixture of Shemite and Stygian strains. The simple ways of the Hyborians had become modified to a large extent by the sensual, luxurious, yet despotic habits of the East.

“Will Mitra aid me?” Yasmela caught Vateesa’s wrist in her eagerness. “We have worshipped Ishtar so long –”

“To be sure he will!” Vateesa was the daughter of an Ophirean priest who had brought his customs with him when he fled from political enemies to Khoraja. “Seek the shrine! I will go with you.”

“I will!” Yasmela rose, but objected when Vateesa prepared to dress her. “It is not fitting that I come before the shrine clad in silk. I will go naked, on my knees, as befits a suppliant, lest Mitra deem I lack humility.”

“Nonsense!” Vateesa had scant respect for the ways of what she deemed a false cult. “Mitra would have folks stand upright before him – not crawling on their bellies like worms, or spilling blood of animals all over his altars.”

Thus objurgated, Yasmela allowed the girl to garb her in the light sleeveless silk shirt, over which was slipped a silken tunic, bound at the waist by a wide velvet girdle. Satin slippers were put upon her slender feet, and a few deft touches of Vateesa’s pink fingers arranged her dark wavy tresses. Then the princess followed the girl, who drew aside a heavy gilt-worked tapestry and threw the golden bolt of the door it concealed. This let into a narrow winding corridor, and down this the two girls went swiftly, through another door and into a broad hallway. Here stood a guardsman in crested gilt helmet, silvered cuirass and gold-chased greaves, with a long-shafted battle-ax in his hands.

A motion from Yasmela checked his exclamation, and saluting, he took his stand again beside the doorway, motionless as a brazen image. The girls traversed the hallway, which seemed immense and eery in the light of the cressets along the lofty walls, and went down a stairway where Yasmela shivered at the blots of shadows which hung in the angles of the walls. Three levels down they halted at last in a narrow corridor whose arched ceiling was crusted with jewels, whose floor was set with blocks of crystal, and whose walls were decorated with golden frieze-work. Down this shining way they stole, holding each other’s hands, to a wide portal of gilt.

Vateesa thrust open the door, revealing a shrine long forgotten except by a faithful few, and royal visitors to Khoraja's court, mainly for whose benefit the fane was maintained. Yasmela had never entered it before, though she was born in the palace. Plain and unadorned in comparison to the lavish display of Ishtar's shrines, there was about it a simplicity of dignity and beauty characteristic of the Mitran religion.

The ceiling was lofty, but it was not domed, and was of plain white marble, as were the walls and floor, the former with a narrow gold frieze running about them. Behind an altar of clear green jade, unstained with sacrifice, stood the pedestal whereon sat the material manifestation of the deity. Yasmela looked in awe at the sweep of the magnificent shoulders, the clear-cut features – the wide straight eyes, the patriarchal beard, the thick curls of the hair, confined by a simple band about the temples. This, though she did not know it, was art in its highest form –

the free, uncramped artistic expression of a highly esthetic race, unhampered by conventional symbolism.

She fell on her knees and thence prostrate, regardless of Vateesa's admonition, and Vateesa, to be on the safe side, followed her example; for after all, she was only a girl, and it was very 153

awesome in Mitra's shrine. But even so she could not refrain from whispering in Yasmela's ear.

"This is but the emblem of the god. None pretends to know what Mitra looks like. This but represents him in idealized human form, as near perfection as the human mind can conceive.

He does not inhabit this cold stone, as your priests tell you Ishtar does. He is everywhere –

above us, and about us, and he dreams betimes in the high places among the stars. But here his being focusses. Therefore call upon him."

"What shall I say?" whispered Yasmela in stammering terror.

"Before you can speak, Mitra knows the contents of your mind –" began Vateesa. Then both girls started violently as a voice began in the air above them. The deep, calm, bell-like tones emanated no more from the image than

from anywhere else in the chamber. Again Yasmela trembled before a bodiless voice speaking to her, but this time it was not from horror or repulsion.

“Speak not, my daughter, for I know your need,” came the intonations like deep musical waves beating rhythmically along a golden beach. “In one manner may you save your kingdom, and saving it, save all the world from the fangs of the serpent which has crawled up out of the darkness of the ages. Go forth upon the streets alone, and place your kingdom in the hands of the first man you meet there.”

The unechoing tones ceased, and the girls stared at each other. Then, rising, they stole forth, nor did they speak until they stood once more in Yasmela’s chamber. The princess stared out of the gold-barred windows. The moon had set. It was long past midnight. Sounds of revelry had died away in the gardens and on the roofs of the city. Khoraja slumbered beneath the stars, which seemed to be reflected in the cressets that twinkled among the gardens and along the streets and on the flat roofs of houses where folk slept.

“What will you do?” whispered Vateesa, all a-tremble.

“Give me my cloak,” answered Yasmela, setting her teeth.

“But alone, in the streets, at this hour!” expostulated Vateesa.

“Mitra has spoken,” replied the princess. “It might have been the voice of the god, or a trick of a priest. No matter. I will go!”

Wrapping a voluminous silken cloak about her lithe figure and donning a velvet cap from which depended a filmy veil, she passed hurriedly through the corridors and approached a 154

bronze door where a dozen spearmen gaped at her as she passed through. This was in a wing of the palace which let directly onto the street; on all other sides it was surrounded by broad gardens, bordered by a high wall. She emerged into the street, lighted by cressets placed at regular intervals.

She hesitated; then, before her resolution could falter, she closed the door behind her. A slight shudder shook her as she glanced up and down the street, which lay silent and bare. This daughter of aristocrats had never before ventured unattended outside her ancestral palace.

Then, steeling herself, she went swiftly up the street. Her satin-slippered feet fell lightly on the pave, but their soft sound brought her heart into her throat. She imagined their fall echoing thunderously through the cavernous city, rousing ragged rat-eyed figures in hidden lairs among the sewers. Every shadow seemed to hide a lurking assassin, every blank doorway to mask the slinking hounds of darkness.

Then she started violently. Ahead of her a figure appeared on the eery street. She drew quickly into a clump of shadows, which now seemed like a haven of refuge, her pulse pounding. The approaching figure went not furtively, like a thief, or timidly, like a fearful traveller. He strode down the nighted street as one who has no need or desire to walk softly. An unconscious swagger was in his stride, and his footfalls resounded on the pave. As he passed near a cresset she saw him plainly—a tall man, in the chain-mail hauberk of a mercenary. She braced herself, then darted from the shadow, holding her cloak close about her.

“Sa-ha!” his sword flashed half out of his sheath. It halted when he saw it was only a woman that stood before him, but his quick glance went over her head, seeking the shadows for possible confederates.

He stood facing her, his hand on the long hilt that jutted forward from beneath the scarlet cloak which flowed carelessly from his mailed shoulders. The torchlight glinted dully on the polished blue steel of his greaves and basinet. A more baleful fire glittered bluely in his eyes. At first glance she saw he was no Kothian; when he spoke she knew he was no Hyborian. He was clad like a captain of the mercenaries, and in that desperate command there were men of many lands, barbarians as well as civilized foreigners. There was a wolfishness about this warrior that marked the barbarian. The eyes of no civilized man, however wild or criminal, ever blazed with such a fire. Wine scented his breath, but he neither staggered nor stammered.

“Have they shut you into the street?” he asked in barbarous Kothic, reaching for her. His fingers closed lightly about her rounded wrist, but she felt that he could splinter its bones without effort. “I’ve but come from the last wine-shop open – Ishtar’s curse on these white-livered reformers who close the grog-houses! ‘Let men sleep rather than guzzle,’ they say –

aye, so they can work and fight better for their masters! Soft-gutted eunuchs, I call them. When I served with the mercenaries of Corinthia we swilled and wenched all night and fought all day

– aye, blood ran down the channels of our swords. But what of you, my girl?

cursed mask –”

She avoided his clutch with a lithe twist of her body, trying not to appear to repulse him. She realized her danger, alone with a drunken barbarian. If she revealed her identity, he might laugh at her, or take himself off. She was not sure he would not cut her throat. Barbaric men did strange inexplicable things. She fought a rising fear.

“Not here,” she laughed. “Come with me –”

“Where?” His wild blood was up, but he was wary as a wolf. “Are you taking me to some den of robbers?”

“No, no, I swear it!” She was hard put to avoid the hand which was again fumbling at her veil.

“Devil bite you, hussy!” he growled disgustedly. “You’re as bad as a Hyrcanian woman, with your damnable veil. Here – let me look at your figure, anyway!”

Before she could prevent it, he wrenched the cloak from her, and she heard his breath hiss between his teeth. He stood holding the cloak, eyeing her as if the sight of her rich garments had somewhat sobered him. She saw suspicion flicker sullenly in his eyes.

“Who the devil are you?” he muttered. “You’re no street-waif – unless your leman robbed the king’s seraglio for your clothes.”

“Never mind.” She dared to lay her white hand on his massive iron-clad arm. “Come with me off the street.”

He hesitated, then shrugged his mighty shoulders. She saw that he half believed her to be some noble lady, who, weary of polite lovers, was taking this means of amusing herself. He allowed her to don the cloak again, and followed her. From the corner of her eye she watched him as they went down the street together. His mail could not conceal his hard lines of tigerish strength. Everything about him was tigerish, elemental, untamed. He was alien as the jungle to her in his difference from the debonair courtiers to whom she was accustomed. She feared him, told herself she loathed his raw

brute strength and unashamed barbarism; yet something breathless and perilous inside her leaned toward him; the hidden primitive chord that lurks in every woman's soul was sounded and responded. She had felt his hardened hand on her arm, and something deep in her tingled to the memory of that contact. Many men had knelt before Yasmela. Here was one she felt had never knelt before any one. Her sensations were those of one leading an unchained tiger; she was frightened, and fascinated by her fright.

She halted at the palace door and thrust lightly against it. Furtively watching her companion, she saw no suspicion in his eyes.

"Palace, eh?" he rumbled. "So you're a maid-in-waiting?"

She found herself wondering, with a strange jealousy, if any of her maids had ever led this war-eagle into her palace. The guards made no sign as she led him between them, but he eyed them as a fierce dog might eye a strange pack. She led him through a curtained doorway into an inner chamber, where he stood, naively scanning the tapestries, until he saw a crystal jar of wine on an ebony table. This he took up with a gratified sigh, tilting it toward his lips. Vateesa ran from an inner room, crying breathlessly, "Oh, my princess –"

"Princess!"

The wine-jar crashed to the floor. With a motion too quick for sight to follow, the mercenary snatched off Yasmela's veil, glaring. He recoiled with a curse, his sword leaping into his hand with a broad shimmer of blue steel. His eyes blazed like a trapped tiger's. The air was supercharged with tension that was like the pause before the bursting of a storm. Vateesa sank to the floor, speechless with terror, but Yasmela faced the infuriated barbarian without flinching. She realized her very life hung in the balance: maddened with suspicion and unreasoning panic, he was ready to deal death at the slightest provocation. But she experienced a certain breathless exhilaration in the crisis.

"Do not be afraid," she said. "I am Yasmela, but there is no reason to fear me."

"Why did you lead me here?" he snarled, his blazing eyes darting all about the chamber. "What manner of trap is this?"

“There is no trickery,” she answered. “I brought you here because you can aid me. I called on the gods – on Mitra – and he bade me go into the streets and ask aid of the first man I met.”

This was something he could understand. The barbarians had their oracles. He lowered his sword, though he did not sheathe it.

“Well, if you’re Yasmela, you need aid,” he grunted. “Your kingdom’s in a devil of a mess.

But how can I aid you? If you want a throat cut, of course –”

“Sit down,” she requested. “Vateesa, bring him wine.”

He complied, taking care, she noticed, to sit with his back against a solid wall, where he could watch the whole chamber. He laid his naked sword across his mail-sheathed knees. She 157

glanced at it in fascination. Its dull blue glimmer seemed to reflect tales of bloodshed and rapine; she doubted her ability to lift it, yet she knew that the mercenary could wield it with one hand as lightly as she could wield a riding-whip. She noted the breadth and power of his hands; they were not the stubby undeveloped paws of a troglodyte. With a guilty start she found herself imagining those strong fingers locked in her dark hair.

He seemed reassured when she deposited herself on a satin divan opposite him. He lifted off his basinet and laid it on the table, and drew back his coif, letting the mail folds fall upon his massive shoulders. She saw more fully now his unlikeness to the Hyborian races. In his dark, scarred face there was a suggestion of moodiness; and without being marked by depravity, or definitely evil, there was more than a suggestion of the sinister about his features, set off by his smoldering blue eyes. A low broad forehead was topped by a square-cut tousled mane as black as a raven’s wing.

“Who are you?” she asked abruptly.

“Conan, a captain of the mercenary spearmen,” he answered, emptying the wine-cup at a gulp and holding it out for more. “I was born in Cimmeria.”

The name meant little to her. She only knew vaguely that it was a wild grim hill-country which lay far to the north, beyond the last outposts of the Hyborian nations, and was peopled by a fierce moody race. She had never before seen one of them.

Resting her chin on her hands, she gazed at him with the deep dark eyes that had enslaved many a heart.

“Conan of Cimmeria,” she said, “you said I needed aid. Why?”

“Well,” he answered, “any man can see that. Here is the king your brother in an Ophirean prison; here is Koth plotting to enslave you; here is this sorcerer screaming hell-fire and destruction down in Shem – and what’s worse, here are your soldiers deserting every day.”

She did not at once reply; it was a new experience for a man to speak so forthrightly to her, his words not couched in courtier phrases.

“Why are my soldiers deserting, Conan?” she asked.

“Some are being hired away by Koth,” he replied, pulling at the wine-jar with relish. “Many think Khoraja is doomed as an independent state. Many are frightened by tales of this dog 158

The Coming of Conan The Cimmerian

Natohk.”

“Will the mercenaries stand?” she asked anxiously.

“As long as you pay us well,” he answered frankly. “Your politics are nothing to us. You can trust Amalric, our general, but the rest of us are only common men who love loot. If you pay the ransom Ophir asks, men say you’ll be unable to pay us. In that case we might go over to the king of Koth, though that cursed miser is no friend of mine. Or we might loot this city. In a civil war the plunder is always plentiful.”

“Why would you not go over to Natohk?” she inquired.

“What could he pay us?” he snorted. “With fat-bellied brass idols he looted from the Shemite cities? As long as you’re fighting Natohk, you may trust us.”

“Would your comrades follow you?” she asked abruptly.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean,” she answered deliberately, “that I am going to make you commander of the armies of Khoraja!”

He stopped short, the goblet at his lips, which curved in a broad grin. His eyes blazed with a new light.

“Commander? Crom! But what will your perfumed nobles say?”

“They will obey me!” She clapped her hands to summon a slave, who entered, bowing deeply.

“Have Count Thespides come to me at once, and the chancellor Taurus, lord Amalric, and the Agha Shupras.

“I place my trust in Mitra,” she said, bending her gaze on Conan, who was now devouring the food placed before him by the trembling Vateesa. “You have seen much war?”

“I was born in the midst of a battle,” he answered, tearing a chunk of meat from a huge joint with his strong teeth. “The first sound my ears heard was the clang of swords and the yells of the slaying. I have fought in blood-feuds, tribal wars, and imperial campaigns.”

“But can you lead men and arrange battle-lines?”

“Well, I can try,” he returned imperturbably. “It’s no more than sword-play on a larger scale.

You draw his guard, then – stab, slash! And either his head is off, or yours.”

The slave entered again, announcing the arrival of the men sent for, and Yasmela went into the outer chamber, drawing the velvet curtains behind her. The nobles bent the knee, in evident surprize at her summons at such an hour.

“I have summoned you to tell you of my decision,” said Yasmela. “The kingdom is in peril –”

“Right enough, my princess.” It was Count Thespides who spoke – a tall man, whose black locks were curled and scented. With one white hand he smoothed his pointed mustache, and with the other he held a velvet chaperon with a scarlet feather fastened by a golden clasp. His pointed shoes were satin, his cote-hardie of gold-broidered velvet. His manner was slightly affected, but the thews under his silks were steely. “It were well to offer Ophir more gold for your royal brother’s release.”

“I strongly disagree,” broke in Taurus the chancellor, an elderly man in an ermine-fringed robe, whose features were lined with the cares of his long service. “We have already offered what will beggar the kingdom to pay. To offer more would further excite Ophir’s cupidity. My princess, I say as I have said before: Ophir will not move until we have met this invading horde. If we lose, he will give king Khossus to Koth; if we win, he will doubtless restore his majesty to us on payment of the ransom.”

“And in the meantime,” broke in Amalric, “the soldiers desert daily, and the mercenaries are restless to know why we dally.” He was a Nemedian, a large man with a lion-like yellow mane.

“We must move swiftly, if at all –”

“Tomorrow we march southward,” she answered. “And there is the man who shall lead you!”

Jerking aside the velvet curtains she dramatically indicated the Cimmerian. It was perhaps not an entirely happy moment for the disclosure. Conan was sprawled in his chair, his feet propped on the ebony table, busily engaged in gnawing a beef-bone which he gripped firmly in both hands. He glanced casually at the astounded nobles, grinned faintly at Amalric, and went on munching with undisguised relish.

“Mitra protect us!” exploded Amalric. “That’s Conan the northron, the most turbulent of all my rogues! I’d have hanged him long ago, were he not the best swordsman that ever donned hauberk –”

“Your highness is pleased to jest!” cried Thespides, his aristocratic features darkening. “This man is a savage – a fellow of no culture or breeding! It is an insult to ask gentlemen to serve under him! I –”

“Count Thespides,” said Yasmela, “you have my glove under your baldric. Please give it to me, and then go.”

“Go?” he cried, starting. “Go where?”

“To Koth or to Hades!” she answered. “If you will not serve me as I wish, you shall not serve me at all.”

“You wrong me, princess,” he answered, bowing low, deeply hurt. “I would not forsake you.

For your sake I will even put my sword at the disposal of this savage.”

“And you, my lord Amalric?”

Amalric swore beneath his breath, then grinned. True soldier of fortune, no shift of fortune, however outrageous, surprized him much.

“I’ll serve under him. A short life and a merry one, say I – and with Conan the Throat-slitter in command, life is likely to be both merry and short. Mitra! If the dog ever commanded more than a company of cutthroats before, I’ll eat him, harness and all!”

“And you, my Agha?” She turned to Shupras.

He shrugged his shoulders resignedly. He was typical of the race evolved along Koth’s southern borders – tall and gaunt, with features leaner and more hawk-like than his purer-blooded desert kin.

“Ishtar gives, princess.” The fatalism of his ancestors spoke for him.

“Wait here,” she commanded, and while Thespides fumed and gnawed his velvet cap, Taurus muttered wearily under his breath, and Amalric strode back and forth, tugging at his yellow beard and grinning like a hungry lion, Yasmela disappeared again through the curtains and clapped her hands for her slaves.

At her command they brought harness to replace Conan’s chain-mail – gorget, sollerets, cuirass, pauldrons, jambes, cuisses, and sallet. When Yasmela again drew the curtains, a Conan in burnished steel stood before his audience. Clad in the plate-armor, vizor lifted and dark face shadowed by the black plumes that nodded above his helmet, there was a grim impressiveness about him that even Thespides grudgingly noted. A jest died suddenly on Amalric’s lips.

“By Mitra,” said he slowly, “I never expected to see you cased in coat-armor, but you do not put it to shame. By my finger-bones, Conan, I have seen kings who wore their harness less 161

regally than you!”

Conan was silent. A vague shadow crossed his mind like a prophecy. In years to come he was to remember Amalric’s words, when the dream became the reality.

III

In the early haze of dawn the streets of Khoraja were thronged by crowds of people who watched the hosts riding from the southern gate. The army was on the move at last. There were the knights, gleaming in richly wrought plate-armor, colored plumes waving above their burnished sallets. Their steeds, caparisoned with silk, lacquered leather and gold buckles, caracoled and curvetted as their riders put them through their paces. The early light struck glints from lance-points that rose like a forest above the array, their pennons flowing in the breeze. Each knight wore a lady’s token, a glove, scarf or rose, bound to his helmet or fastened to his sword-belt. They were the chivalry of Khoraja, five hundred strong, led by Count Thespides, who, men said, aspired to the hand of Yasmela herself.

They were followed by the light cavalry on rangy steeds. The riders were typical hillmen, lean and hawk-faced; peaked steel caps were on their heads and chain-mail glinted under their flowing kaftans. Their main weapon was the terrible Shemitish bow, which could send a shaft five hundred paces. There were five thousand of these, and Shupras rode at their head, his lean face moody beneath his spired helmet.

Close on their heels marched the Khoraja spearmen, always comparatively few in any Hyborian state, where men thought cavalry the only honorable branch of service. These, like the knights, were of ancient Kothic blood – sons of ruined families, broken men, penniless youths, who could not afford horses and plate-armor; five hundred of them.

The mercenaries brought up the rear, a thousand horsemen, two thousand spearmen. The tall horses of the cavalry seemed hard and savage as their riders; they made no curvets or gambades. There was a grimly business-like aspect to these professional killers, veterans of bloody campaigns. Clad from

head to foot in chain-mail, they wore their vizorless head-pieces over linked coifs. Their shields were unadorned, their long lances without guidons. At their saddle-bows hung battle-axes or steel maces, and each man wore at his hip a long broadsword.

The spearmen were armed in much the same manner, though they bore pikes instead of cavalry lances.

They were men of many races and many crimes. There were tall Hyperboreans, gaunt, big-boned, of slow speech and violent natures; tawny-haired Gundermen from the hills of the northwest; swaggering Corinthian renegades; swarthy Zingarians, with bristling black mustaches and fiery tempers; Aquilonians from the distant west. But all, except the Zingarians,

were Hyborians.

Behind all came a camel in rich housings, led by a knight on a great war-horse, and surrounded by a clump of picked fighters from the royal house-troops. Its rider, under the silken canopy of the seat, was a slim, silk-clad figure, at the sight of which the populace, always mindful of royalty, threw up its leather cap and cheered wildly.

Conan the Cimmerian, restless in his plate-armor, stared at the bedecked camel with no great approval, and spoke to Amalric, who rode beside him, resplendent in chain-mail threaded with gold, golden breastplate and helmet with a flowing horsehair crest.

“The princess would go with us. She’s supple, but too soft for this work. Anyway, she’ll have to get out of these robes.”

Amalric twisted his yellow mustache to hide a grin. Evidently Conan supposed Yasmela intended to strap on a sword and take part in the actual fighting, as the barbarian women often fought.

“The women of the Hyborians do not fight like your Cimmerian women, Conan,” he said.

“Yasmela rides with us to watch the battle. Anyway,” he shifted in his saddle and lowered his voice, “between you and me, I have an idea that the princess dares not remain behind. She fears something –”

“An uprising? Maybe we’d better hang a few citizens before we start –”

“No. One of her maids talked – babbled about *Something* that came into the palace by night and frightened Yasmela half out of her wits. It’s some of Natohk’s deviltry, I doubt not. Conan, it’s more than flesh and blood we fight!”

“Well,” grunted the Cimmerian, “it’s better to go meet an enemy than to wait for him.”

He glanced at the long line of wagons and camp-followers, gathered the reins in his mailed hand, and spoke from habit the phrase of the marching mercenaries, “Hell or plunder, comrades

– march!”

Behind the long train the ponderous gates of Khoraja closed. Eager heads lined the battlements.

The citizens well knew they were watching life or death go forth. If the host was overthrown, the future of Khoraja would be written in blood. In the hordes swarming up from the savage south, mercy was a quality unknown.

All day the columns marched, through grassy rolling meadowlands, cut by small rivers, the 163

terrain gradually beginning to slope upward. Ahead of them lay a range of low hills, sweeping in an unbroken rampart from east to west. They camped that night on the northern slopes of those hills, and hook-nosed, fiery-eyed men of the hill tribes came in scores to squat about the fires and repeat news that had come up out of the mysterious desert. Through their tales ran the name of Natohk like a crawling serpent. At his bidding the demons of the air brought thunder and wind and fog, the fiends of the underworld shook the earth with awful roaring. He brought fire out of the air and consumed the gates of walled cities, and burnt armored men to bits of charred bone. His warriors covered the desert with their numbers, and he had five thousand Stygian troops in war-chariots under the rebel prince Kutamun.

Conan listened unperturbed. War was his trade. Life was a continual battle, or series of battles; since his birth Death had been a constant companion. It stalked horrifically at his side; stood at his shoulder beside the gaming-tables;

its bony fingers rattled the wine-cups. It loomed above him, a hooded and monstrous shadow, when he lay down to sleep. He minded its presence no more than a king minds the presence of his cup-bearer. Some day its bony grasp would close; that was all. It was enough that he lived through the present.

However, others were less careless of fear than he. Striding back from the sentry lines, Conan halted as a slender cloaked figure stayed him with an outstretched hand.

“Princess! You should be in your tent.”

“I could not sleep.” Her dark eyes were haunted in the shadow. “Conan, I am afraid!”

“Are there men in the host you fear?” His hand locked on his hilt.

“No man,” she shuddered. “Conan, is there anything you fear?”

He considered, tugging at his chin. “Aye,” he admitted at last, “the curse of the gods.”

Again she shuddered. “I am cursed. A fiend from the abysses has set his mark upon me. Night after night he lurks in the shadows, whispering awful secrets to me. He will drag me down to be his queen in hell. I dare not sleep – he will come to me in my pavilion as he came in the palace. Conan, you are strong – keep me with you! I am afraid!”

She was no longer a princess, but only a terrified girl. Her pride had fallen from her, leaving her unashamed in her nakedness. In her frantic fear she had come to him who seemed strongest. The ruthless power that had repelled her, drew her now.

For answer he drew off his scarlet cloak and wrapped it about her, roughly, as if tenderness of any kind were impossible to him. His iron hand rested for an instant on her slender shoulder, and she shivered again, but not with fear. Like an electric shock a surge of animal vitality swept over her at his mere touch, as if some of his superabundant strength had been imparted to her.

“Lie here.” He indicated a clean-swept space close to a small flickering fire. He saw no incongruity in a princess lying down on the naked ground beside a campfire, wrapped in a warrior’s cloak. But she obeyed without question.

He seated himself near her on a boulder, his broadsword across his knees. With the firelight glinting from his blue steel armor, he seemed like an image of steel – dynamic power for the moment quiescent; not resting, but motionless for the instant, awaiting the signal to plunge again into terrific action. The firelight played on his features, making them seem as if carved out of substance shadowy yet hard as steel. They were immobile, but his eyes smoldered with fierce life. He was not merely a wild man; he was part of the wild, one with the untamable elements of life; in his veins ran the blood of the wolf-pack; in his brain lurked the brooding depths of the northern night; his heart throbbed with the fire of blazing forests.

So, half meditating, half dreaming, Yasmela dropped off to sleep, wrapped in a sense of delicious security. Somehow she knew that no flame-eyed shadow would bend over her in the darkness, with this grim figure from the outlands standing guard above her. Yet once again she wakened, to shudder in cosmic fear, though not because of anything she saw.

It was a low mutter of voices that roused her. Opening her eyes, she saw that the fire was burning low. A feeling of dawn was in the air. She could dimly see that Conan still sat on the boulder; she glimpsed the long blue glimmer of his blade. Close beside him crouched another figure, on which the dying fire cast a faint glow. Yasmela drowsily made out a hooked beak of a nose, a glittering bead of an eye, under a white turban. The man was speaking rapidly in a Shemite dialect she found hard to understand.

“Let Bel wither my arm! I speak truth! By Derketo, Conan, I am a prince of liars, but I do not lie to an old comrade. I swear by the days when we were thieves together in the land of Zamora, before you donned hauberk!

“I saw Natohk; with the others I knelt before him when he made incantations to Set. But I did not thrust my nose in the sand as the rest did. I am a thief of Shumir, and my sight is keener than a weasel’s. I squinted up and saw his veil blowing in the wind. It blew aside, and I saw – I saw – Bel aid me, Conan, I say I *saw!* My blood froze in my veins and my hair stood up. What I had seen burned my soul like a red-hot iron. I could not rest until I had made sure.

“I journeyed to the ruins of Kuthchemes. The door of the ivory dome stood open; in the doorway lay a great serpent, transfixed by a sword. Within the dome lay the body of a man, so shrivelled and distorted I could scarce make it out at first – it was Shevatas, the Zamorian, the only thief in the world I acknowledged as my superior. The treasure was untouched; it lay in shimmering heaps about the corpse. That was all.”

“There were no bones –” began Conan.

“There was nothing!” broke in the Shemite passionately. “Nothing! Only the *one* corpse!”

Silence reigned an instant, and Yasmela shrank with a crawling nameless horror.

“Whence came Natohk?” rose the Shemite’s vibrant whisper. “Out of the desert on a night when the world was blind and wild with mad clouds driven in frenzied flight across the shuddering stars, and the howling of the wind was mingled with the shrieking of the spirits of the wastes. Vampires were abroad that night, witches rode naked on the wind, and werewolves howled across the wilderness. On a black camel he came, riding like the wind, and an unholy fire played about him, the cloven tracks of the camel glowed in the darkness. When Natohk dismounted before Set’s shrine by the oasis of Aphaka, the beast swept into the night and vanished. And I have talked with tribesmen who swore that it suddenly spread gigantic wings and rushed upward into the clouds, leaving a trail of fire behind it. No man has seen that camel since that night, but a black brutish man-like shape shambles to Natohk’s tent and gibbers to him in the blackness before dawn. I will tell you, Conan, Natohk is – look, I will show you an image of what I saw that day by Shushan when the wind blew aside his veil!”

Yasmela saw the glint of gold in the Shemite’s hand, as the men bent closely over something.

She heard Conan grunt; and suddenly blackness rolled over her. For the first time in her life, princess Yasmela had fainted.

IV

Dawn was still a hint of whiteness in the east when the army was again on the march.

Tribesmen had raced into camp, their steeds reeling from the long ride, to

report the desert horde encamped at the Well of Altaku. So through the hills the soldiers pushed hastily, leaving the wagon trains to follow. Yasmela rode with them; her eyes were haunted. The nameless horror had been taking even more awful shape, since she had recognized the coin in the Shemite's hand the night before – one of those secretly molded by the degraded Zugite cult, bearing the features of a man dead three thousand years.

The way wound between ragged cliffs and gaunt crags towering over narrow valleys. Here and 166

there villages perched, huddles of stone huts, plastered with mud. The tribesmen swarmed out to join their kin, so that before they had traversed the hills, the host had been swelled by some three thousand wild archers.

Abruptly they came out of the hills and caught their breath at the vast expanse that swept away to the south. On the southern side the hills fell away sheerly, marking a distinct geographical division between the Kothian uplands and the southern desert. The hills were the rim of the uplands, stretching in an almost unbroken wall. Here they were bare and desolate, inhabited only by the Zaheemi clan, whose duty it was to guard the caravan road. Beyond the hills the desert stretched bare, dusty, lifeless. Yet beyond its horizon lay the Well of Altaku, and the horde of Natohk.

The army looked down on the Pass of Shamla, through which flowed the wealth of the north and the south, and through which had marched the armies of Koth, Khoraja, Shem, Turan and Stygia. Here the sheer wall of the rampart was broken. Promontories ran out into the desert, forming barren valleys, all but one of which were closed on the northern extremity by rugged cliffs. This one was the Pass. It was much like a great hand extended from the hills; two fingers, parted, formed a fan-shaped valley. The fingers were represented by a broad ridge on either hand, the outer sides sheer, the inner, steep slopes. The vale pitched upward as it narrowed, to come out on a plateau, flanked by gully-torn slopes. A well was there, and a cluster of stone towers, occupied by the Zaheemis.

There Conan halted, swinging off his horse. He had discarded the plate-armor for the more familiar chain-mail. Thespides reined in and demanded, "Why do you halt?"

"We'll await them here," answered Conan.

“’T were more knightly to ride out and meet them,” snapped the count.

“They’d smother us with numbers,” answered the Cimmerian. “Besides, there’s no water out there. We’ll camp on the plateau –”

“My knights and I camp in the valley,” retorted Thespides angrily. “We are the vanguard, and *we*, at least, do not fear a ragged desert swarm.”

Conan shrugged his shoulders and the angry nobleman rode away. Amalric halted in his bellowing order, to watch the glittering company riding down the slope into the valley.

“The fools! Their canteens will soon be empty, and they’ll have to ride back up to the well to water their horses.”

“Let them be,” replied Conan. “It goes hard for them to take orders from me. Tell the dog-brothers to ease their harness and rest. We’ve marched hard and fast. Water the horses and let the men munch.”

No need to send out scouts. The desert lay bare to the gaze, though just now this view was limited by low-lying clouds which rested in whitish masses on the southern horizon. The monotony was broken only by a jutting tangle of stone ruins, some miles out on the desert, reputedly the remnants of an ancient Stygian temple. Conan dismounted the archers and ranged them along the ridges, with the wild tribesmen. He stationed the mercenaries and the Khoraji spearmen on the plateau about the well. Farther back, in the angle where the hill road debouched on the plateau, was pitched Yasmela’s pavilion.

With no enemy in sight, the warriors relaxed. Basinets were doffed, coifs thrown back on mailed shoulders, belts let out. Rude jests flew back and forth as the fighting-men gnawed beef and thrust their muzzles deep into ale-jugs. Along the slopes the hillmen made themselves at ease, nibbling dates and olives. Amalric strode up to where Conan sat bareheaded on a boulder.

“Conan, have you heard what the tribesmen say about Natohk? They say – Mitra, it’s too mad even to repeat. What do you think?”

“Seeds rest in the ground for centuries without rotting, sometimes,” answered Conan. “But surely Natohk is a man.”

“I am not sure,” grunted Amalric. “At any rate, you’ve arranged your lines as well as a seasoned general could have done. It’s certain Natohk’s devils can’t fall on us unawares. Mitra, what a fog!”

“I thought it was clouds at first,” answered Conan. “See how it rolls!”

What had seemed clouds was a thick mist moving northward like a great unstable ocean, rapidly hiding the desert from view. Soon it engulfed the Stygian ruins, and still it rolled onward. The army watched in amazement. It was a thing unprecedented – unnatural and inexplicable.

“No use sending out scouts,” said Amalric disgustedly. “They couldn’t see anything. Its edges are near the outer flanges of the ridges. Soon the whole Pass and these hills will be masked –”

Conan, who had been watching the rolling mist with growing nervousness, bent suddenly and laid his ear to the earth. He sprang up with frantic haste, swearing.

“Horses and chariots, thousands of them! The ground vibrates to their tread! Ho, there!” his 168

voice thundered out across the valley to electrify the lounging men. “Burganets and pikes, you dogs! Stand to your ranks!”

At that, as the warriors scrambled into their lines, hastily donning head-pieces and thrusting arms through shield-straps, the mist rolled away, as something no longer useful. It did not slowly lift and fade like a natural fog; it simply vanished, like a blown-out flame. One moment the whole desert was hidden with the rolling fleecy billows, piled mountainously, stratum above stratum; the next, the sun shone from a cloudless sky on a naked desert – no longer empty, but thronged with the living pageantry of war. A great shout shook the hills.

At first glance the amazed watchers seemed to be looking down upon a glittering sparkling sea of bronze and gold, where steel points twinkled like a myriad stars. With the lifting of the fog the invaders had halted as if frozen, in long serried lines, flaming in the sun.

First was a long line of chariots, drawn by the great fierce horses of Stygia, with plumes on their heads – snorting and rearing as each naked driver leaned

back, bracing his powerful legs, his dusky arms knotted with muscles. The fighting-men in the chariots were tall figures, their hawk-like faces set off by bronze helmets crested with a crescent supporting a golden ball.

Heavy bows were in their hands. No common archers, these, but nobles of the South, bred to war and the hunt, who were accustomed to bringing down lions with their arrows.

Behind these came a motley array of wild men on half-wild horses – the warriors of Kush, the first of the great black kingdoms of the grasslands south of Stygia. They were shining ebony, supple and lithe, riding stark naked and without saddle or bridle.

After these rolled a horde that seemed to encompass all the desert. Thousands on thousands of the war-like Sons of Shem: ranks of horsemen in scale-mail corselets and cylindrical helmets –

the *asshuri* of Nippr, Shumir, and Eruk and their sister cities; wild white-robed hordes – the nomad clans.

Now the ranks began to mill and eddy. The chariots drew off to one side while the main host came uncertainly onward. Down in the valley the knights had mounted, and now Count Thespides galloped up the slope to where Conan stood. He did not deign to dismount but spoke abruptly from the saddle.

“The lifting of the mist has confused them! Now is the time to charge! The Kushites have no bows and they mask the whole advance. A charge of my knights will crush them back into the ranks of the Shemites, disrupting their formation. Follow me! We will win this battle with one stroke!”

Conan shook his head. “Were we fighting a natural foe, I would agree. But this confusion is more feigned than real, as if to draw us into a charge. I fear a trap.”

“Then you refuse to move?” cried Thespides, his face dark with passion.

“Be reasonable,” expostulated Conan. “We have the advantage of position –”

With a furious oath Thespides wheeled and galloped back down the valley

where his knights waited impatiently.

Amalric shook his head. “You should not have let him return, Conan. I – look there!”

Conan sprang up with a curse. Thespides had swept in beside his men. They could hear his impassioned voice faintly, but his gesture toward the approaching horde was significant enough. In another instant five hundred lances dipped and the steel-clad company was thundering down the valley.

A young page came running from Yasmela’s pavilion, crying to Conan in a shrill, eager voice,

“My lord, the princess asks why you do not follow and support Count Thespides?”

“Because I am not so great a fool as he,” grunted Conan, reseating himself on the boulder and beginning to gnaw a huge beef-bone.

“You grow sober with authority,” quoth Amalric. “Such madness as that was always your particular joy.”

“Aye, when I had only my own life to consider,” answered Conan. “Now – what in hell –”

The horde had halted. From the extreme wing rushed a chariot, the naked charioteer lashing the steeds like a madman; the other occupant was a tall figure whose robe floated spectrally on the wind. He held in his arms a great vessel of gold and from it poured a thin stream that sparkled in the sunlight. Across the whole front of the desert horde the chariot swept, and behind its thundering wheels was left, like the wake behind a ship, a long thin powdery line that glittered in the sands like the phosphorescent track of a serpent.

“That’s Natohk!” swore Amalric. “What hellish seed is he sowing?”

The charging knights had not checked their headlong pace. Another fifty paces and they would crash into the uneven Kushite ranks, which stood motionless, spears lifted. Now the foremost knights had reached the thin line that glittered across the sands. They did not heed that crawling menace. But as the steel-shod hoofs of the horses struck it, it was as when steel strikes flint –

but with more terrible result. A terrific explosion rocked the desert, which seemed to split apart along the strewn line with an awful burst of white flame.

In that instant the whole foremost line of the knights was seen enveloped in that flame, horses and steel-clad riders withering in the glare like insects in an open blaze. The next instant the rear ranks were piling up on their charred bodies. Unable to check their headlong velocity, rank after rank crashed into the ruins. With appalling suddenness the charge had turned into a shambles where armored figures died amid screaming mangled horses.

Now the illusion of confusion vanished as the horde settled into orderly lines. The wild Kushites rushed into the shambles, spearing the wounded, bursting the helmets of the knights with stones and iron hammers. It was all over so quickly that the watchers on the slopes stood dazed; and again the horde moved forward, splitting to avoid the charred waste of corpses.

From the hills went up a cry: “We fight not men but devils!”

On either ridge the hillmen wavered. One rushed toward the plateau, froth dripping from his beard.

“Flee! flee!” he slobbered. “Who can fight Natohk’s magic?”

With a snarl Conan bounded from his boulder and smote him with the beef-bone; he dropped, blood starting from nose and mouth. Conan drew his sword, his eyes slits of blue bale-fire.

“Back to your posts!” he yelled. “Let another take a backward step and I’ll shear off his head!

Fight, damn you!”

The rout halted as quickly as it had begun. Conan’s fierce personality was like a dash of ice-water in their whirling blaze of terror.

“Take your places,” he directed quickly. “And stand to it! Neither man nor devil comes up Shamla Pass this day!”

Where the plateau rim broke to the valley slope the mercenaries braced their belts and gripped their spears. Behind them the lancers sat their steeds, and to one side were stationed the Khoraja spearmen as reserves. To Yasmela,

standing white and speechless at the door of her tent, the host seemed a pitiful handful in comparison to the thronging desert horde.

Conan stood among the spearmen. He knew the invaders would not try to drive a chariot charge up the Pass in the teeth of the archers, but he grunted with surprize to see the riders 171

dismounting. These wild men had no supply trains. Canteens and pouches hung at their saddle-peaks. Now they drank the last of their water and threw the canteens away.

“This is the death-grip,” he muttered as the lines formed on foot. “I’d rather have had a cavalry charge; wounded horses bolt and ruin formations.”

The horde had formed into a huge wedge, of which the tip was the Stygians and the body, the mailed *asshuri,* flanked by the nomads. In close formation, shields lifted, they rolled onward, while behind them a tall figure in a motionless chariot lifted wide-robed arms in grisly invocation.

As the horde entered the wide valley mouth the hillmen loosed their shafts. In spite of the protective formation, men dropped by dozens. The Stygians had discarded their bows; helmeted heads bent to the blast, dark eyes glaring over the rims of their shields, they came on in an inexorable surge, striding over their fallen comrades. But the Shemites gave back the fire, and the clouds of arrows darkened the skies. Conan gazed over the billowing waves of spears and wondered what new horror the sorcerer would invoke. Somehow he felt that Natohk, like all his kind, was more terrible in defense than in attack; to take the offensive against him invited disaster.

But surely it was magic that drove the horde on in the teeth of death. Conan caught his breath at the havoc wrought in the onsweeping ranks. The edges of the wedge seemed melting away, and already the valley was strewn with dead men. Yet the survivors came on like madmen unaware of death. By the very numbers of their bows, they began to swamp the archers on the cliffs. Clouds of shafts sped upward, driving the hillmen to cover. Panic struck at their hearts at that unwavering advance, and they plied their bows madly, eyes glaring like trapped wolves.

As the horde neared the narrower neck of the Pass, boulders thundered down, crushing men by the scores, but the charge did not waver. Conan’s wolves braced themselves for the inevitable concussion. In their close formation and

superior armor, they took little hurt from the arrows. It was the impact of the charge Conan feared, when the huge wedge should crash against his thin ranks. And he realized now there was no breaking of that onslaught. He gripped the shoulder of a Zaheemi who stood near.

“Is there any way by which mounted men can get down into the blind valley beyond that western ridge?”

“Aye, a steep, perilous path, secret and eternally guarded. But –”

Conan was dragging him along to where Amalric sat his great war-horse.

“Amalric!” he snapped. “Follow this man! He’ll lead you into yon outer valley. Ride down it, circle the end of the ridge, and strike the horde from the rear. Speak not, but go! I know it’s madness, but we’re doomed anyway; we’ll do all the damage we can before we die! Haste!”

Amalric’s mustache bristled in a fierce grin, and a few moments later his lancers were following the guide into a tangle of gorges leading off from the plateau. Conan ran back to the pikemen, sword in hand.

He was not too soon. On either ridge Shupras’ hillmen, mad with anticipation of defeat, rained down their shafts desperately. Men died like flies in the valley and along the slopes – and with a roar and an irresistible upward surge the Stygians crashed against the mercenaries.

In a hurricane of thundering steel, the lines twisted and swayed. It was war-bred noble against professional soldier. Shields crashed against shields, and between them spears drove in and blood spurted.

Conan saw the mighty form of prince Kutamun across the sea of swords, but the press held him hard, breast to breast with dark shapes that gasped and slashed. Behind the Stygians the *asshuri* were surging and yelling.

On either hand the nomads climbed the cliffs and came to hand-grips with their mountain kin.

All along the crests of the ridges the combat raged in blind, gasping ferocity. Tooth and nail, frothing mad with fanaticism and ancient feuds, the tribesmen

rent and slew and died. Wild hair flying, the naked Kushites ran howling into the fray.

It seemed to Conan that his sweat-blinded eyes looked down into a rising ocean of steel that seethed and eddied, filling the valley from ridge to ridge. The fight was at a bloody deadlock.

The hillmen held the ridges, and the mercenaries, gripping their dripping pikes, bracing their feet in the bloody earth, held the Pass. Superior position and armor for a space balanced the advantage of overwhelming numbers. But it could not endure. Wave after wave of glaring faces and flashing spears surged up the slope, the *asshuri* filling the gaps in the Stygian ranks.

Conan looked to see Amalric's lances rounding the western ridge, but they did not come, and the pikemen began to reel back under the shocks. And Conan abandoned all hope of victory and of life. Yelling a command to his gasping captains, he broke away and raced across the plateau to the Khoraja reserves who stood trembling with eagerness. He did not glance toward Yasmela's pavilion. He had forgotten the princess; his one thought was the wild beast instinct to slay before he died.

"This day you become knights!" he laughed fiercely, pointing with his dripping sword toward the hillmen horses, herded near by. "Mount and follow me to hell!"

The hill steeds reared wildly under the unfamiliar clash of the Kothic armor, and Conan's gusty laugh rose above the din as he led them to where the eastern ridge branched away from the plateau. Five hundred footmen – pauper patricians, younger sons, black sheep – on half-wild Shemite horses, charging an army, down a slope where no cavalry had ever dared charge before!

Past the battle-choked mouth of the Pass they thundered, out onto the corpse-littered ridge.

Down the steep slope they rushed, and a score lost their footing and rolled under the hoofs of their comrades. Below them men screamed and threw up their arms – and the thundering charge ripped through them as an avalanche cuts through a forest of saplings. On through the close-packed throngs the Khorajis hurtled, leaving a crushed-down carpet of dead.

And then, as the horde writhed and coiled upon itself, Amalric's lancers, having cut through a cordon of horsemen encountered in the outer valley, swept around the extremity of the western ridge and smote the host in a steel-tipped wedge, splitting it asunder. His attack carried all the dazing demoralization of a surprize on the rear. Thinking themselves flanked by a superior force and frenzied at the fear of being cut off from the desert, swarms of nomads broke and stampeded, working havoc in the ranks of their more steadfast comrades. These staggered and the horsemen rode through them. Up on the ridges the desert fighters wavered, and the hillmen fell on them with renewed fury, driving them down the slopes.

Stunned by surprize, the horde broke before they had time to see it was but a handful which assailed them. And once broken, not even a magician could weld such a horde again. Across the sea of heads and spears Conan's madmen saw Amalric's riders forging steadily through the rout, to the rise and fall of axes and maces, and a mad joy of victory exalted each man's heart and made his arm steel.

Bracing their feet in the wallowing sea of blood whose crimson waves lapped about their ankles, the pikemen in the Pass mouth drove forward, crushing strongly against the milling ranks before them. The Stygians held, but behind them the press of the *asshuri* melted; and over the bodies of the nobles of the south who died in their tracks to a man, the mercenaries rolled, to split and crumple the wavering mass behind.

Up on the cliffs old Shupras lay with an arrow through his heart; Amalric was down, swearing like a pirate, a spear through his mailed thigh. Of Conan's mounted infantry, scarce a hundred and fifty remained in the saddle. But the horde was shattered. Nomads and mailed spearmen broke away, fleeing to their camp where their horses were, and the hillmen swarmed down the slopes, stabbing the fugitives in the back, cutting the throats of the wounded.

In the swirling red chaos a terrible apparition suddenly appeared before Conan's rearing steed.

It was prince Kutamun, naked but for a loin-clout, his harness hacked away, his crested helmet dented, his limbs splashed with blood. With a terrible shout he hurled his broken hilt full into Conan's face, and leaping, seized the stallion's bridle. The Cimmerian reeled in his saddle, half stunned, and with

awful strength the dark-skinned giant forced the screaming steed upward and backward, until it lost its footing and crashed into the muck of bloody sand and writhing bodies.

Conan sprang clear as the horse fell, and with a roar Kutamun was on him. In that mad nightmare of battle, the barbarian never exactly knew how he killed his man. He only knew that a stone in the Stygian's hand crashed again and again on his basinet, filling his sight with flashing sparks, as Conan drove his dagger again and again into his foe's body, without apparent effect on the prince's terrible vitality. The world was swimming to Conan's sight, when with a convulsive shudder the frame that strained against his stiffened and then went limp.

Reeling up, blood streaming down his face from under his dented helmet, Conan glared dizzily at the profusion of destruction which spread before him. From crest to crest the dead lay strewn, a red carpet that choked the valley. It was like a red sea, with each wave a straggling line of corpses. They choked the neck of the Pass, they littered the slopes. And down in the desert the slaughter continued, where the survivors of the horde had reached their horses and streamed out across the waste, pursued by the weary victors – and Conan stood appalled as he noted how few of these were left to pursue.

Then an awful scream rent the clamor. Up the valley a chariot came flying, making nothing of the heaped corpses. No horses drew it, but a great black creature that was like a camel. In the chariot stood Natohk, his robes flying; and gripping the reins and lashing like mad, crouched a black anthropomorphic being that might have been a monster ape.

With a rush of burning wind the chariot swept up the corpse-littered slope, straight toward the pavilion where Yasmela stood alone, deserted by her guards in the frenzy of pursuit. Conan, standing frozen, heard her frenzied scream as Natohk's long arm swept her up into the chariot.

Then the grisly steed wheeled and came racing back down the valley, and no man dared speed arrow or spear lest he strike Yasmela, who writhed in Natohk's arms.

With an inhuman cry Conan caught up his fallen sword and leaped into the path of the hurtling horror. But even as his sword went up, the forefeet of the black beast smote him like a thunderbolt and sent him hurtling a score of feet away, dazed and bruised. Yasmela's cry came hauntingly to his stunned ears as the chariot roared by.

A yell that had nothing of the human in its timbre rang from his lips as Conan rebounded from the bloody earth and seized the rein of a riderless horse that raced past him, throwing himself 175

into the saddle without bringing the charger to a halt. With mad abandon he raced after the rapidly receding chariot. He struck the levels flying, and passed like a whirlwind through the Shemite camp. Into the desert he fled, passing clumps of his own riders, and hard-spurring desert horsemen.

On flew the chariot, and on raced Conan, though his horse began to reel beneath him. Now the open desert lay all about them, bathed in the lurid desolate splendor of sunset. Before him rose up the ancient ruins, and with a shriek that froze the blood in Conan's veins, the unhuman charioteer cast Natohk and the girl from him. They rolled on the sand, and to Conan's dazed gaze, the chariot and its steed altered awfully. Great wings spread from a black horror that in no way resembled a camel, and it rushed upward into the sky, bearing in its wake a shape of blinding flame, in which a black man-like shape gibbered in ghastly triumph. So quickly it passed, that it was like the rush of a nightmare through a horror-haunted dream.

Natohk sprang up, cast a swift look at his grim pursuer, who had not halted but came riding hard, with sword swinging low and spattering red drops; and the sorcerer caught up the fainting girl and ran with her into the ruins.

Conan leaped from his horse and plunged after them. He came into a room that glowed with unholy radiance, though outside dusk was falling swiftly. On a black jade altar lay Yasmela, her naked body gleaming like ivory in the weird light. Her garments lay strewn on the floor, as if ripped from her in brutal haste. Natohk faced the Cimmerian – inhumanly tall and lean, clad in shimmering green silk. He tossed back his veil, and Conan looked into the features he had seen depicted on the Zugite coin.

"Aye, blench, dog!" the voice was like the hiss of a giant serpent. "I am Thugra Khotan! Long I lay in my tomb, awaiting the day of awakening and release. The arts which saved me from the barbarians long ago likewise imprisoned me, but I knew one would come in time – and he came, to fulfill his destiny, and to die as no man has died in three thousand years!

"Fool, do you think you have conquered because my people are scattered? Because I have been betrayed and deserted by the demon I enslaved? I am Thugra Khotan, who shall rule the world despite your paltry gods! The desert

is filled with my people; the demons of the earth shall do my bidding, as the reptiles of the earth obey me. Lust for a woman weakened my sorcery. Now the woman is mine, and feasting on her soul, I shall be unconquerable! Back, fool! You have not conquered Thugra Khotan!”

He cast his staff and it fell at the feet of Conan, who recoiled with an involuntary cry. For as it fell it altered horribly; its outline melted and writhed, and a hooded cobra reared up hissing before the horrified Cimmerian. With a furious oath Conan struck, and his sword sheared the 176

horrid shape in half. And there at his feet lay only the two pieces of a severed ebon staff.

Thugra Khotan laughed awfully, and wheeling, caught up something that crawled loathsomely in the dust of the floor.

In his extended hand something alive writhed and slavered. No tricks of shadows this time. In his naked hand Thugra Khotan gripped a black scorpion, more than a foot in length, the deadliest creature of the desert, the stroke of whose spiked tail was instant death. Thugra Khotan’s skull-like countenance split in a mummy-like grin. Conan hesitated; then without warning he threw his sword.

Caught off guard, Thugra Khotan had no time to avoid the cast. The point struck beneath his heart and stood out a foot behind his shoulders. He went down, crushing the poisonous monster in his grasp as he fell.

Conan strode to the altar, lifting Yasmela in his blood-stained arms. She threw her white arms convulsively about his mailed neck, sobbing hysterically, and would not let him go.

“Crom’s devils, girl!” he grunted. “Loose me! Fifty thousand men have perished today, and there is work for me to do –”

“No!” she gasped, clinging with convulsive strength, as barbaric for the instant as he in her fear and passion. “I will not let you go! I am yours, by fire and steel and blood! You are mine! Back there, I belong to others – here I am mine – and yours! You shall not go!”

He hesitated, his own brain reeling with the fierce upsurging of his violent passions. The lurid unearthly glow still hovered in the shadowy chamber,

lighting ghostlily the dead face of Thugra Khotan, which seemed to grin mirthlessly and cavernously at them. Out on the desert, in the hills among the oceans of dead, men were dying, were howling with wounds and thirst and madness, and kingdoms were staggering. Then all was swept away by the crimson tide that rode madly in Conan's soul, as he crushed fiercely in his iron arms the slim white body that shimmered like a witch-fire of madness before him.

Iron Shadows in the Moon

Iron Shadows in the Moon

A swift crashing of horses through the tall reeds; a heavy fall, a despairing cry. From the dying steed there staggered up its rider, a slender girl in sandals and girdled tunic. Her dark hair fell over her white shoulders, her eyes were those of a trapped animal. She did not look at the jungle of reeds that hemmed in the little clearing, nor at the blue waters that lapped the low shore behind her. Her wide-eyed gaze was fixed in agonized intensity on the horseman who pushed through the reedy screen and dismounted before her.

He was a tall man, slender, but hard as steel. From head to heel he was clad in light silvered mesh-mail that fitted his supple form like a glove. From under the dome-shaped, gold-chased helmet his brown eyes regarded her mockingly.

"Stand back!" her voice shrilled with terror. "Touch me not, Shah Amurath, or I will throw myself into the water and drown!"

He laughed, and his laughter was like the purr of a sword sliding from a silken sheath.

"No, you will not drown, Olivia, daughter of confusion, for the marge is too shallow, and I can catch you before you can reach the deeps. You gave me a merry chase, by the gods, and all my men are far behind us. But there is no horse west of Vilayet that can distance Irem for long."

He nodded at the tall, slender-legged desert stallion behind him.

"Let me go!" begged the girl, tears of despair staining her face. "Have I not suffered enough? Is there any humiliation, pain or degradation you have not

heaped on me? How long must my torment last?”

“As long as I find pleasure in your whimperings, your pleas, tears and writhings,” he answered with a smile that would have seemed gentle to a stranger. “You are strangely virile, Olivia. I wonder if I shall ever weary of you, as I have always wearied of women before. You are ever fresh and unsullied, in spite of me. Each new day with you brings a new delight.

“But come – let us return to Akif, where the people are still feting the conqueror of the miserable *kozaki* ; while he, the conqueror, is engaged in recapturing a wretched fugitive, a foolish, lovely, idiotic runaway!”

“No!” She recoiled, turning toward the waters lapping bluely among the reeds.

“Yes!” His flash of open anger was like a spark struck from flint. With a quickness her tender limbs could not approximate, he caught her wrist, twisting it in pure wanton cruelty until she screamed and sank to her knees.

“Slut! I should drag you back to Akif at my horse’s tail, but I will be merciful and carry you on my saddle-bow, for which favor you shall humbly thank me, while –”

He released her with a startled oath and sprang back, his saber flashing out, as a terrible apparition burst from the reedy jungle sounding an inarticulate cry of hate.

Olivia, staring up from the ground, saw what she took to be either a savage or a madman advancing on Shah Amurath in an attitude of deadly menace. He was powerfully built, naked but for a girdled loin-cloth, which was stained with blood and crusted with dried mire. His black mane was matted with mud and clotted blood; there were streaks of dried blood on his chest and limbs, dried blood on the long straight sword he gripped in his right hand. From under the tangle of his locks, bloodshot eyes glared like coals of blue fire.

“You Hyrkanian dog!” mouthed this apparition in a barbarous accent. “The devils of vengeance have brought you here!”

“Kozak!” ejaculated Shah Amurath, recoiling. “I did not know a dog of you

escaped! I thought you all lay stiff on the steppe, by Ilbars River."

"All but me, damn you!" cried the other. "Oh, I've dreamed of such a meeting as this, while I crawled on my belly through the brambles, or lay under rocks while the ants gnawed my flesh, or crouched in the mire up to my mouth – I dreamed, but never hoped it would come to pass.

Oh, gods of Hell, how I have yearned for this!"

The stranger's bloodthirsty joy was terrible to behold. His jaws champed spasmodically, froth appeared on his blackened lips.

"Keep back!" ordered Shah Amurath, watching him narrowly.

"Ha!" it was like the bark of a timber wolf. "Shah Amurath, the great lord of Akif! Oh, damn you, how I love the sight of you – you, who fed my comrades to the vultures, who tore them between wild horses, blinded and maimed and mutilated them – *ai*, you dog, you filthy dog!"

His voice rose to a maddened scream, and he charged.

In spite of the terror of his wild appearance, Olivia looked to see him fall at the first crossing of 179

the blades. Madman or savage, what could he do, naked, against the mailed chief of Akif?

There was an instant when the blades flamed and licked, seeming barely to touch each other and leap apart; then the broadsword flashed past the saber and descended terrifically on Shah Amurath's shoulder. Olivia cried out at the fury of that stroke. Above the crunch of the rending mail, she distinctly heard the snap of the shoulder-bone. The Hyrkanian reeled back, suddenly ashen, blood spurting over the links of his hauberk; his saber slipped from his nerveless fingers.

"Quarter!" he gasped.

"Quarter?" there was a quiver of frenzy in the stranger's voice. "Quarter such as you gave us, you swine!"

Olivia closed her eyes. This was no longer battle, but butchery, frantic,

bloody, impelled by an hysteria of fury and hate, in which culminated the sufferings of battle, massacre, torture, and fear-ridden, thirst-maddened, hunger-haunted flight. Though Olivia knew that Shah Amurath deserved no mercy or pity from any living creature, yet she closed her eyes and pressed her hands over her ears, to shut out the sight of that dripping sword that rose and fell with the sound of a butcher's cleaver, and the gurgling cries that dwindled away and ceased.

She opened her eyes, to see the stranger turning away from a gory travesty that only vaguely resembled a human being. The man's breast heaved with exhaustion or passion; his brow was beaded with sweat; his right hand was splashed with blood.

He did not speak to her, or even glance toward her. She saw him stride through the reeds that grew at the water's edge, stoop, and tug at something. A boat wallowed out of its hiding-place among the stalks. Then she divined his intention, and was galvanized into action.

"Oh, wait!" she wailed, staggering up and running toward him. "Do not leave me! Take me with you!"

He wheeled and stared at her. There was a difference in his bearing. His bloodshot eyes were sane. It was as if the blood he had just shed had quenched the fire of his frenzy.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"I am called Olivia. I was *his* captive. I ran away. He followed me. That's why he came here.

Oh, do not leave me here! His warriors are not far behind him. They will find his corpse – they will find me near it – oh!" She moaned in her terror and wrung her white hands.

He stared at her in perplexity.

"Would you be better off with me?" he demanded. "I am a barbarian, and I know from your looks that you fear me."

“Yes, I fear you,” she replied, too distracted to dissemble. “My flesh crawls at the horror of your aspect. But I fear the Hyrkanians more. Oh, let me go with you! They will put me to the torture if they find me beside their dead lord.”

“Come, then.” He drew aside, and she stepped quickly into the boat, shrinking from contact with him. She seated herself in the bows, and he stepped into the boat, pushed off with an oar, and using it as a paddle, worked his way tortuously among the tall stalks until they glided out into open water. Then he set to work with both oars, rowing with great, smooth, even strokes, the heavy muscles of arms and shoulders and back rippling in rhythm to his exertions.

There was silence for some time, the girl crouching in the bows, the man tugging at the oars.

She watched him with timorous fascination. It was evident that he was not an Hyrkanian, and he did not resemble the Hyborian races. There was a wolfish hardness about him that marked the barbarian. His features, allowing for the strains and stains of battle and his hiding in the marshes, reflected that same untamed wildness, but they were neither evil nor degenerate.

“Who are you?” she asked. “Shah Amurath called you a *kozak* ; were you of that band?”

“I am Conan, of Cimmeria,” he grunted. “I was with the *kozaki*, as the Hyrkanian dogs called us.”

She knew vaguely that the land he named lay far to the northwest, beyond the farthest boundaries of the different kingdoms of her race.

“I am a daughter of the king of Ophir,” she said. “My father sold me to a Shemite chief, because I would not marry a prince of Koth.”

The Cimmerian grunted in surprize.

Her lips twisted in a bitter smile. “Aye, civilized men sell their children as slaves to savages, sometimes. They call your race barbaric, Conan of Cimmeria.”

“We do not sell our children,” he growled, his chin jutting truculently.

“Well – I was sold. But the desert man did not misuse me. He wished to buy the good will of 181

Shah Amurath, and I was among the gifts he brought to Akif of the purple gardens. Then –"

She shuddered and hid her face in her hands.

"I should be lost to all shame," she said presently. "Yet each memory stings me like a slaver's whip. I abode in Shah Amurath's palace, until some weeks agone he rode out with his hosts to do battle with a band of invaders who were ravaging the borders of Turan. Yesterday he returned in triumph, and a great fete was made to honor him. In the drunkenness and rejoicing, I found an opportunity to steal out of the city on a stolen horse. I had thought to escape – but he followed, and about midday came up with me. I outran his vassals, but him I could not escape.

Then you came."

"I was lying hid in the reeds," grunted the barbarian. "I was one of those dissolute rogues, the Free Companions, who burned and looted along the borders. There were five thousand of us, from a score of races and tribes. We had been serving as mercenaries for a rebel prince in eastern Koth, most of us, and when he made peace with his cursed sovereign, we were out of employment; so we took to plundering the outlying dominions of Koth, Zamora and Turan impartially. A week ago Shah Amurath trapped us near the banks of Ilbars with fifteen thousand men. Mitra! The skies were black with vultures. When the lines broke, after a whole day of fighting, some tried to break through to the north, some to the west. I doubt if any escaped. The steppes were covered with horsemen riding down the fugitives. I broke for the east, and finally reached the edge of the marshes that border this part of Vilayet.

"I've been hiding in the morasses ever since. Only the day before yesterday the riders ceased beating up the reed-brakes, searching for just such fugitives as I. I've squirmed and burrowed and hidden like a snake, feasting on musk-rats I caught and ate raw, for lack of fire to cook them. This dawn I found this boat hidden among the reeds. I hadn't intended going out on the sea until night, but after I killed Shah Amurath, I knew his mailed dogs would be close at hand."

"And what now?"

"We shall doubtless be pursued. If they fail to see the marks left by the boat,

which I covered as well as I could, they'll guess anyway that we took to sea, after they fail to find us among the marshes. But we have a start, and I'm going to haul at these oars until we reach a safe place."

"Where shall we find that?" she asked hopelessly. "Vilayet is an Hyrkanian pond."

"Some folk don't think so," grinned Conan grimly; "notably the slaves that have escaped from galleys and become pirates."

"But what are your plans?"

"The southwestern shore is held by the Hyrkanians for hundreds of miles. We still have a long way to go before we pass beyond their northern boundaries. I intend to go northward, until I think we have passed them. Then we'll turn westward, and try to land on the shore bordered by the uninhabited steppes."

"Suppose we meet pirates, or a storm?" she asked. "And we shall starve on the steppes."

"Well," he reminded her, "I didn't ask you to come with me."

"I am sorry." She bowed her shapely dark head. "Pirates, storms, starvation – they are all kinder than the people of Turan."

"Aye." His dark face grew somber. "I haven't done with them yet. Be at ease, girl. Storms are rare on Vilayet at this time of the year. If we make the steppes, we shall not starve. I was reared in a naked land. It was those cursed marshes, with their stench and stinging flies, that nigh unmanned me. I am at home in the high lands. As for pirates –" He grinned enigmatically, and bent to the oars.

The sun sank like a dull-glowing copper ball into a lake of fire. The blue of the sea merged with the blue of the sky, and both turned to soft dark velvet, clustered with stars and the mirrors of stars. Olivia reclined in the bows of the gently rocking boat, in a state dreamy and unreal.

She experienced an illusion that she was floating in midair, stars beneath her as well as above.

Her silent companion was etched vaguely against the softer darkness. There was no break or falter in the rhythm of his oars; he might have been a fantasmal oarsman, rowing her across the dark lake of Death. But the edge of her fear was dulled, and, lulled by the monotony of motion, she passed into a quiet slumber.

Dawn was in her eyes when she awakened, aware of a ravenous hunger. It was a change in the motion of the boat that had roused her; Conan was resting on his oars, gazing beyond her. She realized that he had rowed all night without pause, and marvelled at his iron endurance. She twisted about to follow his stare, and saw a green wall of trees and shrubbery rising from the water's edge and sweeping away in a wide curve, enclosing a small bay whose waters lay still as blue glass.

"This is one of the many islands that dot this inland sea," said Conan. "They are supposed to be uninhabited. I've heard the Hyrkanians seldom visit them. Besides, they generally hug the shores in their galleys, and we have come a long way. Before sunset we were out of sight of the mainland."

With a few strokes he brought the boat in to shore, and made the painter fast to the arching root of a tree which rose from the water's edge. Stepping ashore, he reached out a hand to help Olivia. She took it, wincing slightly at the blood-stains upon it, feeling a hint of the dynamic strength that lurked in the barbarian's thews.

A dreamy quiet lay over the woods that bordered the blue bay. Then somewhere, far back among the trees, a bird lifted its morning song. A breeze whispered through the leaves, and set them to murmuring. Olivia found herself listening intently for something, she knew not what.

What might be lurking amid those nameless woodlands?

As she peered timidly into the shadows between the trees, something swept into the sunlight with a swift whirl of wings: a great parrot which dropped on to a leafy branch and swayed there, a gleaming image of jade and crimson. It turned its crested head sidewise and regarded the invaders with glittering eyes of jet.

"Crom!" muttered the Cimmerian. "Here is the grandfather of all parrots. He

must be a thousand years old! Look at the evil wisdom of his eyes. What mysteries do you guard, Wise Devil?"

Abruptly the bird spread its flaming wings and soaring from its perch, cried out harshly:

"Yagkoolan yok tha, xuthalla!" and with a wild screech of horribly human laughter, rushed away through the trees to vanish in the opalescent shadows.

Olivia stared after it, feeling the cold hand of nameless foreboding touch her supple spine.

"What did it say?" she whispered.

"Human words, I'll swear," answered Conan; "but in what tongue I can't say."

"Nor I," returned the girl. "Yet it must have learned them from human lips. Human, or –" she gazed into the leafy fastnesses and shuddered slightly, without knowing why.

"Crom, I'm hungry!" grunted the Cimmerian. "I could eat a whole buffalo. We'll look for fruit; but first I'm going to cleanse myself of this dried mud and blood. Hiding in marshes is foul business."

So saying, he laid aside his sword, and wading out shoulder-deep into the blue water, went about his ablutions. When he emerged, his clean-cut bronze limbs shone, his streaming black mane was no longer matted. His blue eyes, though they smoldered with unquenchable fire, were no longer murky or bloodshot. But the tigerish suppleness of limb and the dangerous aspect of feature were not altered.

Strapping on his sword once more, he motioned the girl to follow him, and they left the shore, passing under the leafy arches of the great branches. Underfoot lay a short green sward which cushioned their tread. Between the trunks of the trees they caught glimpses of faery-like vistas.

Presently Conan grunted in pleasure at the sight of golden and russet globes hanging in clusters among the leaves. Indicating that the girl should seat

herself on a fallen tree, he filled her lap with the exotic delicacies, and then himself fell to with unconcealed gusto.

“Ishtar!” said he, between mouthfuls. “Since Ilbars I have lived on rats, and roots I dug out of the stinking mud. This is sweet to the palate, though not very filling. Still, it will serve if we eat enough.”

Olivia was too busy to reply. The sharp edge of the Cimmerian’s hunger blunted, he began to gaze at his fair companion with more interest than previously, noting the lustrous clusters of her dark hair, the peach-bloom tints of her dainty skin, and the rounded contours of her lithe figure which the scanty silk tunic displayed to full advantage.

Finishing her meal, the object of his scrutiny looked up, and meeting his burning, slit-eyed gaze, she changed color and the remnants of the fruit slipped from her fingers.

Without comment, he indicated with a gesture that they should continue their explorations, and rising, she followed him out of the trees and into a glade, the farther end of which was bounded by a dense thicket. As they stepped into the open there was a ripping crash in this thicket, and Conan, bounding aside and carrying the girl with him, narrowly saved them from something that rushed through the air and struck a tree-trunk with a thunderous impact.

Whipping out his sword, Conan bounded across the glade and plunged into the thicket. Silence ensued, while Olivia crouched on the sward, terrified and bewildered. Presently Conan emerged, a puzzled scowl on his face.

“Nothing in that thicket,” he growled. “But there was something –”

He studied the missile that had so narrowly missed them, and grunted incredulously, as if unable to credit his own senses. It was a huge block of greenish stone which lay on the sward at the foot of the tree, whose wood its impact had splintered.

“A strange stone to find on an uninhabited island,” growled Conan.

Olivia’s lovely eyes dilated in wonder. The stone was a symmetrical block, indisputably cut 185

and shaped by human hands. And it was astonishingly massive. The

Cimmerian grasped it with both hands, and with legs braced and the muscles standing out on his arms and back in straining knots, he heaved it above his head and cast it from him, exerting every ounce of nerve and sinew. It fell a few feet in front of him. Conan swore.

“No man living could throw that rock across this glade. It’s a task for siege engines. Yet here there are no mangonels or ballistas.”

“Perhaps it was thrown by some such engine from afar,” she suggested.

He shook his head. “It didn’t fall from above. It came from yonder thicket. See how the twigs are broken? It was thrown as a man might throw a pebble. But who? What? Come!”

She hesitantly followed him into the thicket. Inside the outer ring of leafy brush, the undergrowth was less dense. Utter silence brooded over all. The springy sward gave no sign of footprint. Yet from this mysterious thicket had hurtled that boulder, swift and deadly. Conan bent closer to the sward, where the grass was crushed down here and there. He shook his head angrily. Even to his keen eyes it gave no clue as to what had stood or trodden there. His gaze roved to the green roof above their heads, a solid ceiling of thick leaves and interwoven arches.

And he froze suddenly.

Then rising, sword in hand, he began to back away, thrusting Olivia behind him.

“Out of here, quick!” he urged in a whisper that congealed the girl’s blood.

“What is it? What do you see?”

“Nothing,” he answered guardedly, not halting his wary retreat.

“But what is it, then? What lurks in this thicket?”

“Death!” he answered, his gaze still fixed on the brooding jade arches that shut out the sky.

Once out of the thicket, he took her hand and led her swiftly through the thinning trees, until they mounted a grassy slope, sparsely treed, and emerged upon a low plateau, where the grass grew taller and the trees were few and scattered. And in the midst of that plateau rose a long broad structure of

crumbling greenish stone.

They gazed in wonder. No legends named such a building on any island of Vilayet. They approached it warily, seeing that moss and lichen crawled over the stones, and the broken roof gaped to the sky. On all sides lay bits and shards of masonry, half hidden in the waving grass, 186

giving the impression that once many buildings rose there, perhaps a whole town. But now only the long hall-like structure rose against the sky, and its walls leaned drunkenly among the crawling vines.

Whatever doors had once guarded its portals had long rotted away. Conan and his companion stood in the broad entrance and stared inside. Sunlight streamed in through gaps in the walls and roof, making the interior a dim weave of light and shadow. Grasping his sword firmly, Conan entered, with the slouching gait of a hunting panther, sunken head and noiseless feet.

Olivia tiptoed after him.

Once within, Conan grunted in surprize, and Olivia stifled a scream.

“Look! Oh, look!”

“I see,” he answered. “Nothing to fear. They are statues.”

“But how life-like – and how evil!” she whispered, drawing close to him.

They stood in a great hall, whose floor was of polished stone, littered with dust and broken stones, which had fallen from the ceiling. Vines, growing between the stones, masked the apertures. The lofty roof, flat and undomed, was upheld by thick columns, marching in rows down the sides of the walls. And in each space between these columns stood a strange figure.

They were statues, apparently of iron, black and shining as if continually polished. They were life-size, depicting tall, lithely powerful men, with cruel hawk-like faces. They were naked, and every swell, depression and contour of joint and sinew was represented with incredible realism.

But the most life-like feature was their proud, intolerant faces. These features were not cast in the same mold. Each face possessed its own individual characteristics, though there was a tribal likeness between them all. There was

none of the monotonous uniformity of decorative art, in the faces at least.

“They seem to be listening – and waiting!” whispered the girl uneasily.

Conan rang his hilt against one of the images.

“Iron,” he pronounced. “But Crom! in what molds were they cast?”

He shook his head and shrugged his massive shoulders in puzzlement.

Olivia glanced timidly about the great silent hall. Only the ivy-grown stones, the tendril-clasped pillars, with the dark figures brooding between them, met her gaze. She shifted uneasily and wished to be gone, but the images held a strange fascination for her companion.

He examined them in detail, and barbarian-like, tried to break off their limbs. But their material resisted his best efforts. He could neither disfigure nor dislodge from its niche a single image.

At last he desisted, swearing in his wonder.

“What manner of men were these copied from?” he inquired of the world at large. “These figures are black, yet they are not like negroes. I have never seen their like.”

“Let us go into the sunlight,” urged Olivia, and he nodded, with a baffled glance at the brooding shapes along the walls.

So they passed out of the dusky hall into the clear blaze of the summer sun. She was surprized to note its position in the sky; they had spent more time in the ruins than she had guessed.

“Let us take to the boat again,” she suggested. “I am afraid here. It is a strange evil place. We do not know when we may be attacked by whatever cast the rock.”

“I think we’re safe as long as we’re not under the trees,” he answered. “Come.”

The plateau, whose sides fell away toward the wooded shores on the east,

west, and south, sloped upward toward the north to abut on a tangle of rocky cliffs, the highest point of the island. Thither Conan took his way, suiting his long stride to his companion's gait. From time to time his glance rested inscrutably upon her, and she was aware of it.

They reached the northern extremity of the plateau, and stood gazing up the steep pitch of the cliffs. Trees grew thickly along the rim of the plateau east and west of the cliffs, and clung to the precipitous incline. Conan glanced at these trees suspiciously, but he began the ascent, helping his companion on the climb. The slope was not sheer, and was broken by ledges and boulders. The Cimmerian, born in a hill country, could have run up it like a cat, but Olivia found the going difficult. Again and again she felt herself lifted lightly off her feet and over some obstacle that would have taxed her strength to surmount, and her wonder grew at the sheer physical power of the man. She no longer found his touch repugnant. There was a promise of protection in his iron clasp.

At last they stood on the ultimate pinnacle, their hair stirring in the sea wind. From their feet the cliffs fell away sheerly three or four hundred feet to a narrow tangle of woodlands bordering the beach. Looking southward they saw the whole island lying like a great oval 188

mirror, its bevelled edges sloping down swiftly into a rim of green, except where it broke in the pitch of the cliffs. As far as they could see, on all sides stretched the blue waters, still, placid, fading into dreamy hazes of distance.

"The sea is still," sighed Olivia. "Why should we not take up our journey again?"

Conan, poised like a bronze statue on the cliffs, pointed northward. Straining her eyes, Olivia saw a white fleck that seemed to hang suspended in the aching haze.

"What is it?"

"A sail."

"Hyrkanians?"

"Who can tell, at this distance?"

“They will anchor here – search the island for us!” she cried in quick panic.

“I doubt it. They come from the north, so they can not be searching for us. They may stop for some other reason, in which case we’ll have to hide as best we can. But I believe it’s either a pirate, or an Hyrkanian galley returning from some northern raid. In the latter case they are not likely to anchor here. But we can’t put to sea until they’ve gone out of sight, for they’re coming from the direction in which we must go. Doubtless they’ll pass the island tonight, and at dawn we can go on our way.”

“Then we must spend the night here?” she shivered.

“It’s safest.”

“Then let us sleep here, on the crags,” she urged.

He shook his head, glancing at the stunted trees, at the marching woods below, a green mass which seemed to send out tendrils straggling up the sides of the cliffs.

“Here are too many trees. We’ll sleep in the ruins.”

She cried out in protest.

“Nothing will harm you there,” he soothed. “Whatever threw the stone at us did not follow us out of the woods. There was nothing to show that any wild thing lairs in the ruins. Besides, you 189

are soft-skinned, and used to shelter and dainties. I could sleep naked in the snow and feel no discomfort, but the dew would give you cramps, were we to sleep in the open.”

Olivia helplessly acquiesced, and they descended the cliffs, crossed the plateau and once more approached the gloomy, age-haunted ruins. By this time the sun was sinking below the plateau rim. They had found fruit in the trees near the cliffs, and these formed their supper, both food and drink.

The southern night swept down quickly, littering the dark blue sky with great white stars, and Conan entered the shadowy ruins, drawing the reluctant Olivia after him. She shivered at the sight of those tense black shadows in their niches along the walls. In the darkness that the starlight only faintly

touched, she could not make out their outlines; she could only sense their attitude of waiting – waiting as they had waited for untold centuries.

Conan had brought a great armful of tender branches, well-leafed. These he heaped to make a couch for her, and she lay upon it, with a curious sensation as of one lying down to sleep in a serpent's lair.

Whatever her forebodings, Conan did not share them. The Cimmerian sat down near her, his back against a pillar, his sword across his knees. His eyes gleamed like a panther's in the dusk.

"Sleep, girl," said he. "My slumber is light as a wolf's. Nothing can enter this hall without awaking me."

Olivia did not reply. From her bed of leaves she watched the immobile figure, indistinct in the soft darkness. How strange, to move in fellowship with a barbarian, to be cared for and protected by one of a race, tales of which had frightened her as a child! He came of a people bloody, grim and ferocious. His kinship to the wild was apparent in his every action; it burned in his smoldering eyes. Yet he had not harmed her, and her worst oppressor had been a man the world called civilized. As a delicious languor stole over her relaxing limbs and she sank into foamy billows of slumber, her last waking thought was a drowsy recollection of the firm touch of Conan's fingers on her soft flesh.

II

Olivia dreamed, and through her dreams crawled a suggestion of lurking evil, like a black serpent writhing through flower gardens. Her dreams were fragmentary and colorful, exotic shards of a broken, unknown pattern, until they crystallized into a scene of horror and madness, etched against a background of cyclopean stones and pillars.

She saw a great hall, whose lofty ceiling was upheld by stone columns marching in even rows 190

along the massive walls. Among these pillars fluttered great green and scarlet parrots, and the hall was thronged with black-skinned, hawk-faced warriors. They were not negroes. Neither they nor their garments nor weapons resembled anything of the world the dreamer knew.

They were pressing about one bound to a pillar: a slender white-skinned youth, with a cluster of golden curls about his alabaster brow. His beauty was not altogether human – like the dream of a god, chiseled out of living marble.

The black warriors laughed at him, jeered and taunted in a strange tongue. The lithe naked form writhed beneath their cruel hands. Blood trickled down the ivory thighs to spatter on the polished floor. The screams of the victim echoed through the hall; then lifting his head toward the ceiling and the skies beyond, he cried out a name in an awful voice. A dagger in an ebon hand cut short his cry, and the golden head rolled on the ivory breast.

As if in answer to that desperate cry, there was a rolling thunder as of celestial chariot-wheels, and a figure stood before the slayers, as if materialized out of empty air. The form was of a man, but no mortal man ever wore such an aspect of inhuman beauty. There was an unmistakable resemblance between him and the youth who drooped lifeless in his chains, but the alloy of humanity that softened the godliness of the youth was lacking in the features of the stranger, awful and immobile in their beauty.

The blacks shrank back before him, their eyes slits of fire. Lifting a hand, he spoke, and his tones echoed through the silent halls in deep rich waves of sound. Like men in a trance the black warriors fell back until they were ranged along the walls in regular lines. Then from the stranger's chiseled lips rang a terrible invocation and command: *"Yagkoolan yok tha, xuthalla!"*

At the blast of that awful cry, the black figures stiffened and froze. Over their limbs crept a curious rigidity, an unnatural petrification. The stranger touched the limp body of the youth, and the chains fell away from it. He lifted the corpse in his arms; then ere he turned away, his tranquil gaze swept again over the silent rows of ebony figures, and he pointed to the moon, which gleamed in through the casements. And they understood, those tense, waiting statues that had been men….

Olivia awoke, starting up on her couch of branches, a cold sweat beading her skin. Her heart pounded loud in the silence. She glanced wildly about. Conan slept against his pillar, his head fallen upon his massive breast. The silvery radiance of the late moon crept through the gaping roof, throwing long white lines along the dusty floor. She could see the images dimly, black, tense – waiting. Fighting down a rising hysteria, she saw the moonbeams rest lightly on the pillars and the shapes between.

What was that? A tremor among the shadows where the moonlight fell. A paralysis of horror 191

gripped her, for where there should have been the immobility of death, there was movement: a slow twitching, a flexing and writhing of ebon limbs – an awful scream burst from her lips as she broke the bonds that held her mute and motionless. At her shriek Conan shot erect, teeth gleaming, sword lifted.

“The statues! The statues! – *oh my God, the statues are coming to life!”*

And with the cry she sprang through a crevice in the wall, burst madly through the hindering vines, and ran, ran, ran – blind, screaming, witless – until a grasp on her arm brought her up short and she shrieked and fought against the arms that caught her, until a familiar voice penetrated the mists of her terror, and she saw Conan’s face, a mask of bewilderment in the moonlight.

“What in Crom’s name, girl? Did you have a nightmare?” His voice sounded strange and far away. With a sobbing gasp she threw her arms about his thick neck and clung to him convulsively, crying in panting catches.

“Where are they? Did they follow us?”

“Nobody followed us,” he answered.

She sat up, still clinging to him, and looked fearfully about. Her blind flight had carried her to the southern edge of the plateau. Just below them was the slope, its foot masked in the thick shadows of the woods. Behind them she saw the ruins looming in the high-swinging moon.

“Did you not see them? – the statues, moving, lifting their hands, their eyes glaring in the shadows?”

“I saw nothing,” answered the barbarian uneasily. “I slept more soundly than usual, because it has been so long since I have slumbered the night through; yet I don’t think anything could have entered the hall without waking me.”

“Nothing entered,” a laugh of hysteria escaped her. “It was something there already. Ah, Mitra, we lay down to sleep among them, like sheep making their bed in the shambles!”

“What are you talking about?” he demanded. “I woke at your cry, but before I had time to look about me, I saw you rush out through the crack in the wall. I

pursued you, lest you come to harm. I thought you had a nightmare."

"So I did!" she shivered. "But the reality was more grisly than the dream. Listen!" And she narrated all that she had dreamed and thought to see.

Conan listened attentively. The natural skepticism of the sophisticated man was not his. His mythology contained ghouls, goblins, and necromancers. After she had finished, he sat silent, absently toying with his sword.

"The youth they tortured was like the tall man who came?" he asked at last.

"As like as son to father," she answered, and hesitantly: "If the mind could conceive of the offspring of a union of divinity with humanity, it would picture that youth. The gods of old times mated sometimes with mortal women, our legends tell us."

"What gods?" he muttered.

"The nameless, forgotten ones. Who knows? They have gone back into the still waters of the lakes, the quiet hearts of the hills, the gulfs beyond the stars. Gods are no more stable than men."

"But if these shapes were men, blasted into iron images by some god or devil, how can they come to life?"

"There is witchcraft in the moon," she shuddered. "*He* pointed at the moon; while the moon shines on them, they live. So I believe."

"But we were not pursued," muttered Conan, glancing toward the brooding ruins. "You might have dreamed they moved. I am of a mind to return and see."

"No, no!" she cried, clutching him desperately. "Perhaps the spell upon them holds them in the hall. Do not go back! They will rend you limb from limb! Oh, Conan, let us go into our boat and flee this awful island! Surely the Hyrkanian ship has passed us now! Let us go!"

So frantic was her pleading that Conan was impressed. His curiosity in regard to the images was balanced by his superstition. Foes of flesh and blood he did

not fear, however great the odds, but any hint of the supernatural roused all the dim monstrous instincts of fear that are the heritage of the barbarian.

He took the girl's hand and they went down the slope and plunged into the dense woods, where the leaves whispered, and nameless night-birds murmured drowsily. Under the trees the shadows clustered thick, and Conan swerved to avoid the denser patches. His eyes roved continuously from side to side, and often flitted into the branches above them. He went quickly 193

yet warily, his arm girdling the girl's waist so strongly that she felt as if she were being carried rather than guided. Neither spoke. The only sound was the girl's quick nervous panting, the rustle of her small feet in the grass. So they came through the trees to the edge of the water, shimmering like molten silver in the moonlight.

"We should have brought fruit for food," muttered Conan; "but doubtless we'll find other islands. As well leave now as later; it's but a few hours till dawn –"

His voice trailed away. The painter was still made fast to the looping root. But at the other end was only a smashed and shattered ruin, half submerged in the shallow water.

A stifled cry escaped Olivia. Conan wheeled and faced the dense shadows, a crouching image of menace. The noise of the night-birds was suddenly silent. A brooding stillness reigned over the woods. No breeze moved the branches, yet somewhere the leaves stirred faintly.

Quick as a great cat Conan caught up Olivia and ran. Through the shadows he raced like a phantom, while somewhere above and behind them sounded a curious rushing among the leaves, that implacably drew closer and closer. Then the moonlight burst full upon their faces, and they were speeding up the slope of the plateau.

At the crest Conan laid Olivia down, and turned to glare back at the gulf of shadows they had just quitted. The leaves shook in a sudden breeze; that was all. He shook his mane with an angry growl. Olivia crept to his feet like a frightened child. Her eyes looked up at him, dark wells of horror.

"What are we to do, Conan?" she whispered.

He looked at the ruins, stared again into the woods below.

“We’ll go to the cliffs,” he decided, lifting her to her feet. “Tomorrow I’ll make a raft, and we’ll trust our luck to the sea again.”

“It was not – not *they* that destroyed our boat?” It was half question, half assertion.

He shook his head, grimly taciturn.

Every step of the way across that moon-haunted plateau was a sweating terror for Olivia, but no black shapes stole subtly from the looming ruins, and at last they reached the foot of the crags, which rose stark and gloomily majestic above them. There Conan halted in some uncertainty, at last selecting a place sheltered by a broad ledge, nowhere near any trees.

“Lie down and sleep if you can, Olivia,” he said. “I’ll keep watch.”

But no sleep came to Olivia, and she lay watching the distant ruins and the wooded rim until the stars paled, the east whitened, and dawn in rose and gold struck fire from the dew on the grass-blades.

She rose stiffly, her mind reverting to all the happenings of the night. In the morning light some of its terrors seemed like figments of an overwrought imagination. Conan strode over to her, and his words electrified her.

“Just before dawn I heard the creak of timbers and the rasp and clack of cordage and oars. A ship has put in and anchored at the beach not far away – probably the ship whose sail we saw yesterday. We’ll go up the cliffs and spy on her.”

Up they went, and lying on their bellies among the boulders, saw a painted mast jutting up beyond the trees to the west.

“An Hyrkanian craft, from the cut of her rigging,” muttered Conan. “I wonder if the crew –”

A distant medley of voices reached their ears, and creeping to the southern edge of the cliffs, they saw a motley horde emerge from the fringe of trees

along the western rim of the plateau, and stand there a space in debate. There was much flourishing of arms, brandishing of swords, and loud rough argument. Then the whole band started across the plateau toward the ruins, at a slant that would take them close by the foot of the cliffs.

“Pirates!” whispered Conan, a grim smile on his thin lips. “It’s an Hyrkanian galley they’ve captured. Here – crawl among these rocks.

“Don’t show yourself unless I call to you,” he instructed, having secreted her to his satisfaction among a tangle of boulders along the crest of the cliffs. “I’m going to meet these dogs. If I succeed in my plan, all will be well, and we’ll sail away with them. If I don’t succeed – well, hide yourself in the rocks until they’re gone, for no devils on this island are as cruel as these sea-wolves.”

And tearing himself from her reluctant grasp, he swung quickly down the cliffs.

Looking fearfully from her eyrie, Olivia saw the band had neared the foot of the cliffs. Even as she looked, Conan stepped out from among the boulders and faced them, sword in hand. They gave back with yells of menace and surprize; then halted uncertainly to glare at this figure 195

which had appeared so suddenly from the rocks. There were some seventy of them, a wild horde made up of men from many nations: Kothians, Zamorians, Brythunians, Corinthians, Shemites. Their features reflected the wildness of their natures. Many bore the scars of the lash or the branding-iron. There were cropped ears, slit noses, gaping eye-sockets, stumps of wrists

– marks of the hangman as well as scars of battle. Most of them were half naked, but the garments they wore were fine; gold-braided jackets, satin girdles, silken breeches, tattered, stained with tar and blood, vied with pieces of silver-chased armor. Jewels glittered in nose-rings and ear-rings, and in the hilts of their daggers.

Over against this bizarre mob stood the tall Cimmerian in strong contrast with his hard bronzed limbs and clean-cut vital features.

“Who are you?” they roared.

“Conan the Cimmerian!” his voice was like the deep challenge of a lion. “One

of the Free Companions. I mean to try my luck with the Red Brotherhood. Who's your chief?"

"I, by Ishtar!" bellowed a bull-like voice, as a huge figure swaggered forward: a giant, naked to the waist, where his capacious belly was girdled by a wide sash that upheld voluminous silken pantaloons. His head was shaven except for a scalp-lock, his mustaches drooped over a rat-trap mouth. Green Shemitish slippers with upturned toes were on his feet, a long straight sword in his hand.

Conan stared and glared.

"Sergius of Khrosha, by Crom!"

"Aye, by Ishtar!" boomed the giant, his small black eyes glittering with hate. "Did you think I had forgot? Ha! Sergius never forgets an enemy. Now I'll hang you up by the heels and skin you alive. At him, lads!"

"Aye, send your dogs at me, big-belly," sneered Conan with bitter scorn. "You were always a coward, you Kothic cur."

"Coward! To me?" The broad face turned black with passion. "On guard, you northern dog! I'll cut out your heart!"

In an instant the pirates had formed a circle about the rivals, their eyes blazing, their breath sucking between their teeth in bloodthirsty enjoyment. High up among the crags Olivia watched, sinking her nails into her palms in her painful excitement.

Without formality the combatants engaged, Sergius coming in with a rush, quick on his feet as a giant cat, for all his bulk. Curses hissed between his clenched teeth as he lustily swung and parried. Conan fought in silence, his eyes slits of blue bale-fire.

The Kothian ceased his oaths to save his breath. The only sounds were the quick scuff of feet on the sward, the panting of the pirate, the ring and clash of steel. The swords flashed like white fire in the early sun, wheeling and circling. They seemed to recoil from each other's contact, then leap together again instantly. Sergius was giving back; only his superlative skill had saved

him thus far from the blinding speed of the Cimmerian's onslaught. A louder clash of steel, a sliding rasp, a choking cry – from the pirate horde a fierce yell split the morning as Conan's sword plunged through their captain's massive body. The point quivered an instant from between Sergius' shoulders, a hand's breadth of white fire in the sunlight; then the Cimmerian wrenched back his steel and the pirate chief fell heavily, face down, and lay in a widening pool of blood, his broad hands twitching for an instant.

Conan wheeled toward the gaping corsairs.

"Well, you dogs!" he roared, "I've sent your chief to hell – what says the law of the Red Brotherhood?"

Before any could answer, a rat-faced Brythunian, standing behind his fellows, whirled a sling swiftly and deadly. Straight as an arrow sped the stone to its mark, and Conan reeled and fell as a tall tree falls to the woodsman's ax. Up on the cliff Olivia caught at the boulders for support.

The scene swam dizzily before her eyes; all she could see was the Cimmerian lying limply on the sward, blood oozing from his head.

The rat-faced one yelped in triumph and ran to stab the prostrate man, but a lean Corinthian thrust him back.

"What, Aratus, would you break the law of the Brotherhood, you dog?"

"No law is broken," snarled the Brythunian.

"No law? Why, you dog, this man you have just struck down is by just rights our captain!"

"Nay!" shouted Aratus. "He was not of our band, but an outsider. He had not been admitted to fellowship. Slaying Sergius does not make him captain, as would have been the case had one of us killed him."

"But he wished to join us," retorted the Corinthian. "He said so."

At that a great clamor arose, some siding with Aratus, some with the Corinthian, whom they called Ivanos. Oaths flew thick, challenges were

passed, hands fumbled at sword-hilts.

At last a Shemite spoke up above the clamor: “Why do you argue over a dead man?”

“He’s not dead,” answered the Corinthian, rising from beside the prostrate Cimmerian. “It was a glancing blow; he’s only stunned.”

At that the clamor rose anew, Aratus trying to get at the senseless man and Ivanos finally bestriding him, sword in hand, and defying all and sundry. Olivia sensed that it was not so much in defense of Conan that the Corinthian took his stand, but in opposition to Aratus.

Evidently these men had been Sergius’ lieutenants, and there was no love lost between them.

After more arguments, it was decided to bind Conan and take him along with them, his fate to be voted on later.

The Cimmerian, who was beginning to regain consciousness, was bound with leather girdles, and then four pirates lifted him, and with many complaints and curses, carried him along with the band, which took up its journey across the plateau once more. The body of Sergius was left where it had fallen, a sprawling, unlovely shape on the sun-washed sward.

Up among the rocks Olivia lay stunned by the disaster. She was incapable of speech or action, and could only lie there and stare with horrified eyes as the brutal horde dragged her protector away.

How long she lay there, she did not know. Across the plateau she saw the pirates reach the ruins and enter, dragging their captive. She saw them swarming in and out of the doors and crevices, prodding into the heaps of debris, and clambering about the walls. After awhile a score of them came back across the plateau and vanished among the trees on the western rim, dragging the body of Sergius after them, presumably to cast into the sea. About the ruins the others were cutting down trees and securing material for a fire. Olivia heard their shouts, unintelligible in the distance, and she heard the voices of those who had gone into the woods, echoing among the trees. Presently they came back into sight, bearing casks of liquor and leathern sacks of food. They headed for the ruins, cursing lustily under their burdens.

Of all this Olivia was but mechanically cognizant. Her overwrought brain was almost ready to collapse. Left alone and unprotected, she realized how much

the protection of the Cimmerian had meant to her. There intruded vaguely a wonderment at the mad pranks of Fate, that could make the daughter of a king the companion of a red-handed barbarian. With it came a revulsion toward her own kind. Her father, and Shah Amurath, they were civilized men. And from them 198

she had had only suffering. She had never encountered any civilized man who treated her with kindness unless there were an ulterior motive behind his actions. Conan had shielded her, protected her, and – so far – demanded nothing in return. Laying her head in her rounded arms she wept, until distant shouts of ribald revelry roused her to her own danger.

She glanced from the dark ruins about which the fantastic figures, small in the distance, weaved and staggered, to the dusky depths of the green forest. Even if her terrors in the ruins the night before had been only dreams, the menace that lurked in those green leafy depths below was no figment of nightmare. Were Conan slain or carried away captive, her only choice would lie between giving herself up to the human wolves of the sea, or remaining alone on that devil-haunted island.

As the full horror of her situation swept over her, she fell forward in a swoon.

III

The sun was hanging low when Olivia regained her senses. A faint wind wafted to her ears distant shouts and snatches of ribald song. Rising cautiously, she looked out across the plateau.

She saw the pirates clustered about a great fire outside the ruins, and her heart leaped as a group emerged from the interior dragging some object she knew was Conan. They propped him against the wall, still evidently bound fast, and there ensued a long discussion, with much brandishing of weapons. At last they dragged him back into the hall, and took up anew the business of ale-guzzling. Olivia sighed; at least she knew that the Cimmerian still lived. Fresh determination steeled her. As soon as night fell she would steal to those grim ruins and free him or be taken herself in the attempt. And she knew it was not selfish interest alone which prompted her decision.

With this in mind she ventured to creep from her refuge to pluck and eat nuts which grew sparsely near at hand. She had not eaten since the day before. It was while so occupied that she was troubled by a sensation of being watched.

She scanned the rocks nervously, then, with a shuddering suspicion, crept to the north edge of the cliff and gazed down into the waving green mass below, already dusky with the sunset. She saw nothing; it was impossible that she could be seen, when not on the cliff's edge, by anything lurking in those woods. Yet she distinctly felt the glare of hidden eyes, and felt that *something* animate and sentient was aware of her presence and her hiding-place.

Stealing back to her rocky eyrie, she lay watching the distant ruins until the dusk of night masked them, and she marked their position by the flickering flames about which black figures leaped and cavorted groggily.

Then she rose. It was time to make her attempt. But first she stole back to the northern edge of the cliffs, and looked down into the woods that bordered the beach. And as she strained her 199

eyes in the dim starlight, she stiffened, and an icy hand touched her heart.

Far below her something moved. It was as if a black shadow detached itself from the gulf of shadows below her. It moved slowly up the sheer face of the cliff – a vague bulk, shapeless in the semi-darkness. Panic caught Olivia by the throat, and she struggled with the scream that tugged at her lips. Turning, she fled down the southern slope.

That flight down the shadowed cliffs was a nightmare in which she slid and scrambled, catching at jagged rocks with cold fingers. As she tore her tender skin and bruised her soft limbs on the rugged boulders over which Conan had so lightly lifted her, she realized again her dependence on the iron-thewed barbarian. But this thought was but one in a fluttering maelstrom of dizzy fright.

The descent seemed endless, but at last her feet struck the grassy levels, and in a very frenzy of eagerness she sped away toward the fire that burned like the red heart of night. Behind her, as she fled, she heard a shower of stones rattle down the steep slope, and the sound lent wings to her heels. What grisly climber dislodged those stones she dared not try to think.

Strenuous physical action dissipated her blind terror somewhat and before she had reached the ruins, her mind was clear, her reasoning faculties alert, though her limbs trembled from her efforts.

She dropped to the sward and wriggled along on her belly until, from behind a

small tree that had escaped the axes of the pirates, she watched her enemies. They had completed their supper, but were still drinking, dipping pewter mugs or jewelled goblets into the broken heads of the wine-casks. Some were already snoring drunkenly on the grass, while others had staggered into the ruins. Of Conan she saw nothing. She lay there, while the dew formed on the grass about her and the leaves overhead, and the men about the fire cursed, gambled and argued. There were only a few about the fire; most of them had gone into the ruins to sleep.

She lay watching them, her nerves taut with the strain of waiting, the flesh crawling between her shoulders at the thought of what might be watching her in turn – of what might be stealing up behind her. Time dragged on leaden feet. One by one the revellers sank down in drunken slumber, until all were stretched senseless beside the dying fire.

Olivia hesitated – then was galvanized by a distant glow rising through the trees. The moon was rising!

With a gasp she rose and hurried toward the ruins. Her flesh crawled as she tiptoed among the drunken shapes that sprawled beside the gaping portal. Inside were many more; they shifted and mumbled in their besotted dreams, but none awakened as she glided among them. A sob of 200

joy rose to her lips as she saw Conan. The Cimmerian was wide awake, bound upright to a pillar, his eyes gleaming in the faint reflection of the waning fire outside.

Picking her way among the sleepers, she approached him. Lightly as she had come, he had heard her; had seen her when first framed in the portal. A faint grin touched his hard lips.

She reached him and clung to him an instant. He felt the quick beating of her heart against his breast. Through a broad crevice in the wall stole a beam of moonlight, and the air was instantly supercharged with subtle tension. Conan felt it and stiffened. Olivia felt it and gasped. The sleepers snored on. Bending quickly, she drew a dagger from its senseless owner’s belt, and set to work on Conan’s bonds. They were sail cords, thick and heavy, and tied with the craft of a sailor. She toiled desperately, while the tide of moonlight crept slowly across the floor toward the feet of the crouching black figures between the pillars.

Her breath came in gasps; Conan's wrists were free, but his elbows and legs were still bound fast. She glanced fleetingly at the figures along the walls—waiting, waiting. They seemed to watch her with the awful patience of the undead. The drunkards beneath her feet began to stir and groan in their sleep. The moonlight crept down the hall, touching the black feet. The cords fell from Conan's arms, and taking the dagger from her, he ripped the bonds from his legs with a single quick slash. He stepped out from the pillar, flexing his limbs, stoically enduring the agony of returning circulation. Olivia crouched against him, shaking like a leaf. Was it some trick of the moonlight that touched the eyes of the black figures with fire, so that they glimmered redly in the shadows?

Conan moved with the abruptness of a jungle cat. Catching up his sword from where it lay in a stack of weapons near by, he lifted Olivia lightly from her feet and glided through an opening that gaped in the ivy-grown wall.

No word passed between them. Lifting her in his arms he set off swiftly across the moon-bathed sward. Her arms about his iron neck, the Ophirean closed her eyes, cradling her dark curly head against his massive shoulder. A delicious sense of security stole over her.

In spite of his burden, the Cimmerian crossed the plateau swiftly, and Olivia, opening her eyes, saw that they were passing under the shadow of the cliffs.

"Something climbed the cliffs," she whispered. "I heard it scrambling behind me as I came down."

"We'll have to chance it," he grunted.

"I am not afraid – now," she sighed.

"You were not afraid when you came to free me, either," he answered. "Crom, what a day it has been! Such haggling and wrangling I never heard. I'm nearly deaf. Aratus wished to cut out my heart, and Ivanos refused, to spite Aratus, whom he hates. All day long they snarled and spat at one another, and the crew quickly grew too drunk to vote either way –"

He halted suddenly, an image of bronze in the moonlight. With a quick gesture he tossed the girl lightly to one side and behind him. Rising to her

knees on the soft sward, she screamed at what she saw.

Out of the shadows of the cliffs moved a monstrous shambling bulk – an anthropomorphic horror, a grotesque travesty of creation.

In general outline it was not unlike a man. But its face, limned in the bright moonlight, was bestial, with close-set ears, flaring nostrils, and a great flabby-lipped mouth in which gleamed white tusk-like fangs. It was covered with shaggy grayish hair, shot with silver which shone in the moonlight, and its great misshapen paws hung nearly to the earth. Its bulk was tremendous; as it stood on its short bowed legs, its bullet-head rose above that of the man who faced it; the sweep of the hairy breast and giant shoulders was breath-taking; the huge arms were like knotted trees.

The moonlight scene swam, to Olivia's sight. This, then, was the end of the trail – for what human being could withstand the fury of that hairy mountain of thews and ferocity? Yet as she stared in wide-eyed horror at the bronzed figure facing the monster, she sensed a kinship in the antagonists that was almost appalling. This was less a struggle between man and beast than a conflict between two creatures of the wild, equally merciless and ferocious. With a flash of white tusks, the monster charged.

The mighty arms spread wide as the beast plunged, stupefyingly quick for all his vast bulk and stunted legs.

Conan's action was a blur of speed Olivia's eye could not follow. She only saw that he evaded that deadly grasp, and his sword, flashing like a jet of white lightning, sheared through one of those massive arms between shoulder and elbow. A great spout of blood deluged the sward as the severed member fell, twitching horribly, but even as the sword bit through, the other malformed hand locked in Conan's black mane.

Only the iron neck-muscles of the Cimmerian saved him from a broken neck at that instant. His 202

left hand darted out to clamp on the beast's squat throat, his left knee was jammed hard against the brute's hairy belly. Then began a terrific struggle, which lasted only seconds, but which seemed like ages to the paralyzed girl.

The ape maintained his grasp in Conan's hair, dragging him toward the tusks that glistened in the moonlight. The Cimmerian resisted this effort, with his

left arm rigid as iron, while the sword in his right hand, wielded like a butcher-knife, sank again and again into the groin, breast and belly of his captor. The beast took its punishment in awful silence, apparently unweakened by the blood that gushed from its ghastly wounds. Swiftly the terrible strength of the anthropoid overcame the leverage of braced arm and knee. Inexorably Conan's arm bent under the strain; nearer and nearer he was drawn to the slavering jaws that gaped for his life.

Now the blazing eyes of the barbarian glared into the bloodshot eyes of the ape. But as Conan tugged vainly at his sword, wedged deep in the hairy body, the frothing jaws snapped spasmodically shut, an inch from the Cimmerian's face, and he was hurled to the sward by the dying convulsions of the monster.

Olivia, half fainting, saw the ape heaving, thrashing and writhing, gripping, man-like, the hilt that jutted from its body. A sickening instant of this, then the great bulk quivered and lay still.

Conan rose and limped over to the corpse. The Cimmerian breathed heavily, and walked like a man whose joints and muscles have been wrenched and twisted almost to their limit of endurance. He felt his bloody scalp and swore at the sight of the long black red-stained strands still grasped in the monster's shaggy hand.

"Crom!" he panted. "I feel as if I'd been racked! I'd rather fight a dozen men. Another instant and he'd have bitten off my head. Blast him, he's torn a handful of my hair out by the roots."

Gripping his hilt with both hands he tugged and worked it free. Olivia stole close to clasp his arm and stare down wide-eyed at the sprawling monster.

"What – what is it?" she whispered.

"A gray man-ape," he grunted. "Dumb, and man-eating. They dwell in the hills that border the eastern shore of this sea. How this one got to this island, I can't say. Maybe he floated here on driftwood, blown out from the mainland in a storm."

"And it was he that threw the stone?"

"Yes; I suspected what it was when we stood in the thicket and I saw the boughs bending over our heads. These creatures always lurk in the deepest woods they can find, and seldom emerge.

What brought him into the open, I can’t say, but it was lucky for us; I’d have had no chance 203

with him among the trees.”

“It followed me,” she shivered. “I saw it climbing the cliffs.”

“And following his instinct, he lurked in the shadow of the cliff, instead of following you out across the plateau. His kind are creatures of darkness and the silent places, haters of the sun and moon.”

“Do you suppose there are others?”

“No, else the pirates had been attacked when they went through the woods. The gray ape is wary, for all his strength, as shown by his hesitancy in falling upon us in the thicket. His lust for you must have been great, to have driven him to attack us finally in the open. What –”

He started and wheeled back toward the way they had come. The night had been split by an awful scream. It came from the ruins.

Instantly there followed a mad medley of yells, shrieks, and cries of blasphemous agony.

Though accompanied by a ringing of steel, the sounds were of massacre rather than battle.

Conan stood frozen, the girl clinging to him in a frenzy of terror. The clamor rose to a crescendo of madness, and then the Cimmerian turned and went swiftly toward the rim of the plateau, with its fringe of moon-limned trees. Olivia’s legs were trembling so that she could not walk; so he carried her, and her heart calmed its frantic pounding as she nestled into his cradling arms.

They passed under the shadowy forest, but the clusters of blackness held no terrors, the rifts of silver discovered no grisly shape. Night-birds murmured slumberously. The yells of slaughter dwindled behind them, masked in the distance to a confused jumble of sound. Somewhere a parrot called, like an eery echo: *“Yagkoolan yok tha, xuthalla!”* So they came to the tree-fringed water’s edge and saw the galley lying at anchor, her sail shining white in the moonlight. Already the stars were paling for dawn.

IV

In the ghastly whiteness of dawn a handful of tattered, blood-stained figures staggered through the trees and out on to the narrow beach. There were forty-four of them, and they were a cowed and demoralized band. With panting haste they plunged into the water and began to wade toward the galley, when a stern challenge brought them up standing.

Etched against the whitening sky they saw Conan the Cimmerian standing in the bows, sword 204

in hand, his black mane tossing in the dawn wind.

“Stand!” he ordered. “Come no nearer. What would you have, dogs?”

“Let us come aboard!” croaked a hairy rogue, fingering a bloody stump of ear. “We’d be gone from this devil’s island.”

“The first man who tries to climb over the side, I’ll split his skull,” promised Conan.

They were forty-four to one, but he held the whip-hand. The fight had been hammered out of them.

“Let us come aboard, good Conan,” whined a red-sashed Zamorian, glancing fearfully over his shoulder at the silent woods. “We have been so mauled, bitten, scratched, and rended, and are so weary from fighting and running, that not one of us can lift a sword.”

“Where is that dog Aratus?” demanded Conan.

“Dead, with the others! It was devils fell upon us! They were rending us to pieces before we could awake – a dozen good rovers died in their sleep. The ruins were full of flame-eyed shadows, with tearing fangs and sharp talons.”

“Aye!” put in another corsair. “They were the demons of the isle, which took the forms of molten images, to befool us. Ishtar! We lay down to sleep among them. We are no cowards.

We fought them as long as mortal man may strive against the powers of darkness. Then we broke away and left them tearing at the corpses like

jackals. But surely they'll pursue us."

"Aye, let us come aboard!" clamored a lean Shemite. "Let us come in peace, or we must come sword in hand, and though we be so weary you will doubtless slay many of us, yet you can not prevail against us many."

"Then I'll knock a hole in the planks and sink her," answered Conan grimly. A frantic chorus of expostulation rose, which Conan silenced with a lion-like roar.

"Dogs! Must I aid my enemies? Shall I let you come aboard and cut out my heart?"

"Nay, nay!" they cried eagerly. "Friends – friends, Conan. We are thy comrades, lad! We be all lusty rogues together. We hate the king of Turan, not each other."

Their gaze hung on his brown frowning face.

“Then if I am one of the Brotherhood,” he grunted, “the laws of the Trade apply to me; and since I killed your chief in fair fight, then I am your captain!”

There was no dissent. The pirates were too cowed and battered to have any thought except a desire to get away from that island of fear. Conan’s gaze sought out the blood-stained figure of the Corinthian.

“How, Ivanos!” he challenged. “You took my part, once. Will you uphold my claims again?”

“Aye, by Mitra!” The pirate, sensing the trend of feeling, was eager to ingratiate himself with the Cimmerian. “He is right, lads; he is our lawful captain!”

A medley of acquiescence rose, lacking enthusiasm perhaps, but with sincerity accentuated by the feel of the silent woods behind them which might mask creeping ebony devils with red eyes and dripping talons.

“Swear by the hilt,” Conan demanded.

Forty-four sword-hilts were lifted toward him, and forty-four voices blended in the corsair’s oath of allegiance.

Conan grinned and sheathed his sword. “Come aboard, my bold swashbucklers, and take the oars.”

He turned and lifted Olivia to her feet, from where she had crouched shielded by the gunwales.

“And what of me, sir?” she asked.

“What would you?” he countered, watching her narrowly.

“To go with you, wherever your path may lie!” she cried, throwing her white arms about his bronzed neck.

The pirates, clambering over the rail, gasped in amazement.

“To sail a road of blood and slaughter?” he questioned. “This keel will stain the blue waves crimson wherever it plows.”

“Aye, to sail with you on blue seas or red,” she answered passionately. “You are a barbarian, and I am an outcast, denied by my people. We are both pariahs, wanderers of the earth. Oh, take me with you!”

With a gusty laugh he lifted her to his fierce lips.

“I’ll make you Queen of the Blue Sea! Cast off there, dogs! We’ll scorch King Yildiz’s pantaloons yet, by Crom!”

Xuthal of the Dusk

Xuthal of the Dusk

The desert shimmered in the heat waves. Conan the Cimmerian stared out over the aching desolation and involuntarily drew the back of his powerful hand over his blackened lips. He stood like a bronze image in the sand, apparently impervious to the murderous sun, though his only garment was a silk loin-cloth, girdled by a wide gold-buckled belt from which hung a saber and a broad-bladed poniard. On his clean-cut limbs were evidences of scarcely healed wounds.

At his feet rested a girl, one white arm clasping his knee, against which her blond head drooped. Her white skin contrasted with his hard bronzed limbs; her short silken tunic, low-necked and sleeveless, girdled at the waist, emphasized rather than concealed her lithe figure.

Conan shook his head, blinking. The sun’s glare half blinded him. He lifted a small canteen from his belt and shook it, scowling at the faint splashing within.

The girl moved wearily, whimpering.

“Oh, Conan, we shall die here! I am so thirsty!”

The Cimmerian growled wordlessly, glaring truculently at the surrounding waste, with outthrust jaw, and blue eyes smoldering savagely from under his black tousled mane, as if the desert were a tangible enemy.

He stooped and put the canteen to the girl's lips.

"Drink till I tell you to stop, Natala," he commanded.

She drank with little panting gasps, and he did not check her. Only when the canteen was empty did she realize that he had deliberately allowed her to drink all their water supply, little enough that it was.

Tears sprang to her eyes. "Oh, Conan," she wailed, wringing her hands, "why did you let me drink it all? I did not know – now there is none for you!"

"Hush," he growled. "Don't waste your strength in weeping."

Straightening, he threw the canteen from him.

"Why did you do that?" she whispered.

He did not reply, standing motionless and immobile, his fingers closing slowly about the hilt of his saber. He was not looking at the girl; his fierce eyes seemed to plumb the mysterious purple hazes of the distance.

Endowed with all the barbarian's ferocious love of life and instinct to live, Conan the Cimmerian yet knew that he had reached the end of his trail. He had not come to the limits of his endurance, but he knew another day under the merciless sun in those waterless wastes would bring him down. As for the girl, she had suffered enough. Better a quick painless sword-stroke than the lingering agony that faced him. Her thirst was temporarily quenched; it was a false mercy to let her suffer until delirium and death brought relief. Slowly he slid the saber from its sheath.

He halted suddenly, stiffening. Far out on the desert to the south, something glimmered through the heat waves.

At first he thought it a phantom, one of the mirages which had mocked and maddened him in that accursed desert. Shading his sun-dazzled eyes, he made

out spires and minarets, and gleaming walls. He watched it grimly, waiting for it to fade and vanish. Natala had ceased to sob; she struggled to her knees and followed his gaze.

“Is it a city, Conan?” she whispered, too fearful to hope. “Or is it but a shadow?”

The Cimmerian did not reply for a space. He closed and opened his eyes several times; he looked away, then back. The city remained where he had first seen it.

“The devil knows,” he grunted. “It’s worth a try, though.”

He thrust the saber back in its sheath. Stooping, he lifted Natala in his mighty arms as though she had been an infant. She resisted weakly.

“Don’t waste your strength carrying me, Conan,” she pleaded. “I can walk.”

“The ground gets rockier here,” he answered. “You would soon wear your sandals to shreds,”

glancing at her soft green foot-wear. “Besides, if we are to reach that city at all, we must do it quickly, and I can make better time this way.”

The chance for life had lent fresh vigor and resilience to the Cimmerian’s steely thews. He strode out across the sandy waste as if he had just begun the journey. A barbarian of barbarians, the vitality and endurance of the wild were his, granting him survival where civilized men would have perished.

He and the girl were, so far as he knew, the sole survivors of Prince Almuric’s army, that mad motley horde which, following the defeated rebel prince of Koth, swept through the Lands of Shem like a devastating sandstorm and drenched the outlands of Stygia with blood. With a Stygian host on its heels, it had cut its way through the black kingdom of Kush, only to be annihilated on the edge of the southern desert. Conan likened it in his mind to a great torrent, dwindling gradually as it rushed southward, to run dry at last in the sands of the naked desert.

The bones of its members – mercenaries, outcasts, broken men, outlaws – lay

strewn from the Kothic uplands to the dunes of the wilderness.

From that final slaughter, when the Stygians and the Kushites closed in on the trapped remnants, Conan had cut his way clear and fled on a camel with the girl. Behind them the land swarmed with enemies; the only way open to them was the desert to the south. Into those menacing depths they had plunged.

The girl was a Brythunian, whom Conan had found in the slave-market of a stormed Shemite city, and appropriated. She had had nothing to say in the matter, but her new position was so far superior to the lot of any Hyborian woman in a Shemitish seraglio, that she accepted it thankfully. So she had shared in the adventures of Almuric's damned horde.

For days they had fled into the desert, pursued so far by Stygian horsemen that when they shook off the pursuit, they dared not turn back. They pushed on, seeking water, until the camel died. Then they went on foot. For the past few days their suffering had been intense. Conan had shielded Natala all he could, and the rough life of the camp had given her more stamina and strength than the average woman possesses; but even so, she was not far from collapse.

The sun beat fiercely on Conan's tangled black mane. Waves of dizziness and nausea rose in his brain, but he set his teeth and strode on unwaveringly. He was convinced that the city was a reality and not a mirage. What they would find there he had no idea. The inhabitants might be hostile. Nevertheless it was a fighting chance, and that was as much as he had ever asked.

The sun was nigh to setting when they halted in front of the massive gate, grateful for the shade. Conan stood Natala on her feet, and stretched his aching arms. Above them the walls towered some thirty feet in height, composed of a smooth greenish substance that shone almost like glass. Conan scanned the parapets, expecting to be challenged, but saw no one. Impatiently he shouted, and banged on the gate with his saber-hilt, but only the hollow echoes mocked him.

Natala cringed close to him, frightened by the silence. Conan tried the portal, and stepped back, drawing his saber, as it swung silently inward. Natala stifled a cry.

“Oh, look, Conan!”

Just inside the gate lay a human body. Conan glared at it narrowly, then looked beyond it. He saw a wide open expanse, like a court, bordered by the arched doorways of houses composed of the same greenish material as the outer walls. These edifices were lofty and imposing, pinnacled with shining domes and minarets. There was no sign of life among them. In the center of the court rose the square curb of a well, and the sight stung Conan, whose mouth felt caked with dry dust. Taking Natala’s wrist he drew her through the gate, and closed it behind them.

“Is he dead?” she whispered, shrinkingly indicating the man who lay limply before the gate.

The body was that of a tall powerful individual, apparently in his prime; the skin was yellow, the eyes slightly slanted; otherwise the man differed little from the Hyborian type. He was clad in high-strapped sandals and a tunic of purple silk, and a short sword in a cloth-of-gold scabbard hung from his girdle. Conan felt his flesh. It was cold. There was no sign of life in the body.

“Not a wound on him,” grunted the Cimmerian, “but he’s dead as Almuric with forty Stygian arrows in him. In Crom’s name, let’s see to the well! If there’s water in it, we’ll drink, dead men or no.”

There was water in the well, but they did not drink of it. Its level was a good fifty feet below the curb, and there was nothing to draw it up with. Conan cursed blackly, maddened by the sight of the stuff just out of his reach, and turned to look for some means of obtaining it. Then a scream from Natala brought him about.

The supposedly dead man was rushing upon him, eyes blazing with indisputable life, his short sword gleaming in his hand. Conan cursed amazedly, but wasted no time in conjecture. He met the hurtling attacker with a slashing cut of his saber that sheared through flesh and bone. The fellow’s head thudded on the flags; the body staggered drunkenly, an arch of blood jetting from the severed jugular; then it fell heavily.

Conan glared down, swearing softly.

“This fellow is no deader now than he was a few minutes agone. Into what madhouse have we strayed?”

Natala, who had covered her eyes with her hands at the sight, peeked between

her fingers and 211

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shook with fear.

“Oh, Conan, will the people of the city not kill us, because of this?”

“Well,” he growled, “this creature would have killed us if I hadn’t lopped off his head.”

He glanced at the archways that gaped blankly from the green walls above them. He saw no hint of movement, heard no sound.

“I don’t think any one saw us,” he muttered. “I’ll hide the evidence –”

He lifted the limp carcass by its swordbelt with one hand, and grasping the head by its long hair in the other, he half carried, half dragged the ghastly remnants over to the well.

“Since we can’t drink this water,” he gritted vindictively, “I’ll see that nobody else enjoys drinking it. Curse such a well, anyway!” He heaved the body over the curb and let it drop, tossing the head after it. A dull splash sounded far beneath.

“There’s blood on the stones,” whispered Natala.

“There’ll be more unless I find water soon,” growled the Cimmerian, his short store of patience about exhausted. The girl had almost forgotten her thirst and hunger in her fear, but not Conan.

“We’ll go into one of these doors,” he said. “Surely we’ll find people after awhile.”

“Oh, Conan!” she wailed, snuggling up as close to him as she could. “I’m afraid! This is a city of ghosts and dead men! Let us go back into the desert! Better to die there, than to face these terrors!”

“We’ll go into the desert when they throw us off the walls,” he snarled. “There’s water somewhere in this city, and I’ll find it, if I have to kill every man in it.”

“But what if they come to life again?” she whispered.

“Then I’ll keep killing them until they stay dead!” he snapped. “Come on! That doorway is as good as another! Stay behind me, but don’t run unless I tell you to.”

She murmured a faint assent and followed him so closely that she stepped on his heels, to his irritation. Dusk had fallen, filling the strange city with purple shadows. They entered the open 212

doorway, and found themselves in a wide chamber, the walls of which were hung with velvet tapestries, worked in curious designs. Floor, walls and ceiling were of the green glassy stone, the walls decorated with gold frieze-work. Furs and satin cushions littered the floor. Several doorways let into other rooms. They passed through, and traversed several chambers, counterparts of the first. They saw no one, but the Cimmerian grunted suspiciously.

“Some one was here not long ago. This couch is still warm from contact with a human body.

That silk cushion bears the imprint of some one’s hips. Then there’s a faint scent of perfume lingering in the air.”

A weird unreal atmosphere hung over all. Traversing this dim silent palace was like an opium dream. Some of the chambers were unlighted, and these they avoided. Others were bathed in a soft weird light that seemed to emanate from jewels set in the walls in fantastic designs.

Suddenly, as they passed into one of these illumined chambers, Natala cried out and clutched her companion’s arm. With a curse he wheeled, glaring for an enemy, bewildered because he saw none.

“What’s the matter?” he snarled. “If you ever grab my sword-arm again, I’ll skin you. Do you want me to get my throat cut? What were you yelling about?”

“Look there,” she quavered, pointing.

Conan grunted. On a table of polished ebony stood golden vessels, apparently containing food and drink. The room was unoccupied.

“Well, whoever this feast is prepared for,” he growled, “he’ll have to look

elsewhere tonight."

"Dare we eat it, Conan?" ventured the girl nervously. "The people might come upon us, and –"

"Lir an mannanan mac lir!" he swore, grabbing her by the nape of her neck and thrusting her into a gilded chair at the end of the table with no great ceremony. "We starve and you make objections! Eat!"

He took the chair at the other end, and seizing a jade goblet, emptied it at a gulp. It contained a crimson wine-like liquor of a peculiar tang, unfamiliar to him, but it was like nectar to his parched gullet. His thirst allayed, he attacked the food before him with rare gusto. It too was strange to him: exotic fruits and unknown meats. The vessels were of exquisite workmanship, and there were golden knives and forks as well. These Conan ignored, grasping the meat-joints in his fingers and tearing them with his strong teeth. The Cimmerian's table manners were rather wolfish at any time. His civilized companion ate more daintily, but just as ravenously. It occurred to Conan that the food might be poisoned, but the thought did not lessen his appetite; 213

he preferred to die of poisoning rather than starvation.

His hunger satisfied, he leaned back with a deep sigh of relief. That there were humans in that silent city was evidenced by the fresh food, and perhaps every dark corner concealed a lurking enemy. But he felt no apprehension on that score, having a large confidence in his own fighting ability. He began to feel sleepy, and considered the idea of stretching himself on a nearby couch for a nap.

Not so Natala. She was no longer hungry and thirsty, but she felt no desire to sleep. Her lovely eyes were very wide indeed as she timidly glanced at the doorways, boundaries of the unknown. The silence and mystery of the strange place preyed on her. The chamber seemed larger, the table longer than she had first noticed, and she realized that she was farther from her grim protector than she wished to be. Rising quickly, she went around the table and seated herself on his knee, glancing nervously at the arched doorways. Some were lighted and some were not, and it was at the unlighted ones she gazed longest.

"We have eaten, drunk and rested," she urged. "Let us leave this place, Conan. It's evil. I can feel it."

“Well, we haven’t been harmed so far,” he began, when a soft but sinister rustling brought him about. Thrusting the girl off his knee he rose with the quick ease of a panther, drawing his saber, facing the doorway from which the sound had seemed to come. It was not repeated, and he stole forward noiselessly, Natala following with her heart in her mouth. She knew he suspected peril. His outthrust head was sunk between his giant shoulders, he glided forward in a half crouch, like a stalking tiger. He made no more noise than a tiger would have made.

At the doorway he halted, Natala peering fearfully from behind him. There was no light in the room, but it was partially illuminated by the radiance behind them, which streamed across it into yet another chamber. And in this chamber a man lay on a raised dais. The soft light bathed him, and they saw he was a counterpart of the man Conan had killed before the outer gate, except that his garments were richer, and ornamented with jewels which twinkled in the uncanny light. Was he dead, or merely sleeping? Again came that faint sinister sound, as if some one had thrust aside a hanging. Conan drew back, drawing the clinging Natala with him.

He clapped his hand over her mouth just in time to check her shriek.

From where they now stood, they could no longer see the dais, but they could see the shadow it cast on the wall behind it. And now another shadow moved across the wall: a huge shapeless black blot. Conan felt his hair prickle curiously as he watched. Distorted though it might be, he felt that he had never seen a man or beast which cast such a shadow. He was consumed with curiosity, but some instinct held him frozen in his tracks. He heard Natala’s quick panting 214

gasps as she stared with dilated eyes. No other sound disturbed the tense stillness. The great shadow engulfed that of the dais. For a long instant only its black bulk was thrown on the smooth wall. Then slowly it receded, and once more the dais was etched darkly against the wall. But the sleeper was no longer upon it.

An hysterical gurgle rose in Natala’s throat, and Conan gave her an admonitory shake. He was aware of an iciness in his own veins. Human foes he did not fear; anything understandable, however grisly, caused no tremors in his broad breast. But this was beyond his ken.

After awhile, however, his curiosity conquered his uneasiness, and he moved

out into the unlighted chamber again, ready for anything. Looking into the other room, he saw it was empty. The dais stood as he had first seen it, except that no bejeweled human lay thereon. Only on its silken covering shone a single drop of blood, like a great crimson gem. Natala saw it and gave a low choking cry, for which Conan did not punish her. Again he felt the icy hand of fear.

On that dais a man had lain; *something* had crept into the chamber and carried him away. What that something was, Conan had no idea, but an aura of unnatural horror hung over those dim-lit chambers.

He was ready to depart. Taking Natala's hand, he turned back, then hesitated. Somewhere back among the chambers they had traversed, he heard the sound of a footfall. A human foot, bare or softly shod, had made that sound, and Conan, with the wariness of a wolf, turned quickly aside.

He believed he could come again into the outer court, and yet avoid the room from which the sound had appeared to come.

But they had not crossed the first chamber on their new route, when the rustle of a silken hanging brought them about suddenly. Before a curtained alcove stood a man eyeing them intently.

He was exactly like the others they had encountered: tall, well-made, clad in purple garments, with a jeweled girdle. There was neither surprize nor hostility in his amber eyes. They were dreamy as a lotus-eater's. He did not draw the short sword at his side. After a tense moment he spoke, in a far-away detached tone, and a language his hearers did not understand.

On a venture Conan replied in Stygian, and the stranger answered in the same tongue: "Who are you?"

"I am Conan, a Cimmerian," answered the barbarian. "This is Natala, of Brythunia. What city is this?"

The man did not at once reply. His dreamy sensuous gaze rested on Natala, and he drawled,

"Of all my rich visions, this is the strangest! Oh, girl of the golden locks, from what far 215

dreamland do you come? From Andarra, or Tothra, or Kuth of the star-girdle?"

"What madness is this?" growled the Cimmerian harshly, not relishing the man's words or manner.

The other did not heed him.

"I have dreamed more gorgeous beauties," he murmured; "lithe women with hair dusky as night, and dark eyes of unfathomed mystery. But your skin is white as milk, your eyes are clear as dawn, and there is about you a freshness and daintiness alluring as honey. Come to my couch, little dream-girl!"

He advanced and reached for her, and Conan struck aside his hand with a force that might have broken his arm. The man reeled back, clutching the numbed member, his eyes clouding.

"What rebellion of ghosts is this?" he muttered. "Barbarian, I command ye – begone! Fade!

Dissipate! Fade! Vanish!"

"I'll vanish your head from your shoulders!" snarled the infuriated Cimmerian, his saber gleaming in his hand. "Is this the welcome you give strangers? By Crom, I'll drench these hangings in blood!"

The dreaminess had faded from the other's eyes, to be replaced by a look of bewilderment.

"Thog!" he ejaculated. "You are real! Whence come you? Who are you? What do you in Xuthal?"

"We came from the desert," Conan growled. "We wandered into the city at dusk, famishing.

We found a feast set for some one, and we ate it. I have no money to pay for it. In my country, no starving man is denied food, but you civilized people must have your recompense – if you are like all I ever met. We have done no harm and we were just leaving. By Crom, I do not like this place, where dead men rise, and sleeping men vanish into the bellies of shadows!"

The man started violently at the last comment, his yellow face turning ashy.

“What do you say? Shadows? Into the bellies of shadows?”

“Well,” answered the Cimmerian cautiously, “whatever it is that takes a man from a sleeping-dais and leaves only a spot of blood.”

“You have seen? You have *seen* ?” The man was shaking like a leaf; his voice cracked on the 216

high-pitched note.

“Only a man sleeping on a dais, and a shadow that engulfed him,” answered Conan.

The effect of his words on the other was horrifying. With an awful scream the man turned and rushed from the chamber. In his blind haste he caromed from the side of the door, righted himself, and fled through the adjoining chambers, still screaming at the top of his voice.

Amazed, Conan stared after him, the girl trembling as she clutched the giant’s arm. They could no longer see the flying figure, but they still heard his frightful screams, dwindling in the distance, and echoing as from vaulted roofs. Suddenly one cry, louder than the others, rose and broke short, followed by blank silence.

“Crom!”

Conan wiped the perspiration from his forehead with a hand that was not entirely steady.

“Surely this is a city of the mad! Let’s get out of here, before we meet other madmen!”

“It is all a nightmare!” whimpered Natala. “We are dead and damned! We died out on the desert and are in hell! We are disembodied spirits – *ow!”* Her yelp was induced by a resounding spank from Conan’s open hand.

“You’re no spirit when a pat makes you yell like that,” he commented, with the grim humor which frequently manifested itself at inopportune times. “We are alive, though we may not be if we loiter in this devil-haunted pile. Come!”

They had traversed but a single chamber when again they stopped short.

Some one or something was approaching. They faced the doorway whence the sounds came, waiting for they knew not what. Conan's nostrils widened, and his eyes narrowed. He caught the faint scent of the perfume he had noticed earlier in the night. A figure framed itself in the doorway.

Conan swore under his breath; Natala's red lips opened wide.

It was a woman who stood there staring at them in wonder. She was tall, lithe, shaped like a goddess; clad in a narrow girdle crusted with jewels. A burnished mass of night-black hair set off the whiteness of her ivory body. Her dark eyes, shaded by long dusky lashes, were deep with sensuous mystery. Conan caught his breath at her beauty, and Natala stared with dilated eyes. The Cimmerian had never seen such a woman; her facial outline was Stygian, but she was not dusky-skinned like the Stygian women he had known; her limbs were like alabaster.

But when she spoke, in a deep rich musical voice, it was in the Stygian tongue.

"Who are you? What do you in Xuthal? Who is that girl?"

"Who are you?" bluntly countered Conan, who quickly wearied of answering questions.

"I am Thalis the Stygian," she replied. "Are you mad, to come here?"

"I've been thinking I must be," he growled. "By Crom, if I am sane, I'm out of place here, because these people are all maniacs. We stagger in from the desert, dying of thirst and hunger, and we come upon a dead man who tries to stab me in the back. We enter a palace, rich and luxuriant, yet apparently empty. We find a meal set, but with no feasters. Then we see a shadow devour a sleeping man –" he watched her narrowly and saw her change color slightly.

"Well?"

"Well what?" she demanded, apparently regaining control of herself.

"I was just waiting for you to run through the rooms howling like a wild woman," he answered.

“The man I told about the shadow did.”

She shrugged her slim ivory shoulders. “That was the screams I heard, then. Well, to every man his fate, and it’s foolish to squeal like a rat in a trap. When Thog wants me, he will come for me.”

“Who is Thog?” demanded Conan suspiciously.

She gave him a long appraising stare that brought color to Natala’s face and made her bite her small red lip.

“Sit down on that divan and I will tell you,” she said. “But first tell me your names.”

“I am Conan, a Cimmerian, and this is Natala, a daughter of Brythunia,” he answered. “We are refugees of an army destroyed on the borders of Kush. But I am not desirous of sitting down, where black shadows might steal up on my back.”

With a light musical laugh, she seated herself, stretching out her supple limbs with studied abandon.

“Be at ease,” she advised. “If Thog wishes you, he will take you, wherever you are. That man you mentioned, who screamed and ran – did you not hear him give one great cry, and then fall silent? In his frenzy, he must have run full into that which he sought to escape. No man can 218

avoid his fate.”

Conan grunted noncommittally, but he sat down on the edge of a couch, his saber across his knees, his eyes wandering suspiciously about the chamber. Natala nestled against him, clutching him jealously, her legs tucked up under her. She eyed the stranger woman with suspicion and resentment. She felt small and dust-stained and insignificant before this glamorous beauty, and she could not mistake the look in the dark eyes which feasted on every detail of the bronzed giant’s physique.

“What is this place, and who are these people?” demanded Conan.

“This city is called Xuthal; it is very ancient. It is built over an oasis, which the founders of Xuthal found in their wanderings. They came from the east, so

long ago that not even their descendants remember the age."

"Surely there are not many of them; these palaces seem empty."

"No; and yet more than you might think. The city is really one great palace, with every building inside the walls closely connected with the others. You might walk among these chambers for hours and see no one. At other times, you would meet hundreds of the inhabitants."

"How is that?" Conan inquired uneasily; this savored too strongly of sorcery for comfort.

"Much of the time these people lie in sleep. Their dream-life is as important – and to them as real – as their waking life. You have heard of the black lotus? In certain pits of the city it grows. Through the ages they have cultivated it, until, instead of death, its juice induces dreams, gorgeous and fantastic. In these dreams they spend most of their time. Their lives are vague, erratic, and without plan. They dream, they wake, drink, love, eat, and dream again.

They seldom finish anything they begin, but leave it half completed and sink back again into the slumber of the black lotus. That meal you found – doubtless one awoke, felt the urge of hunger, prepared the meal for himself, then forgot about it and wandered away to dream again."

"Where do they get their food?" interrupted Conan. "I saw no fields or vineyards outside the city. Have they orchards and cattle-pens within the walls?"

She shook her head. "They manufacture their own food out of the primal elements. They are wonderful scientists, when they are not drugged with their dream-flower. Their ancestors were mental giants, who built this marvelous city in the desert, and though the race became slaves to their curious passions, some of their wonderful knowledge still remains. Have you wondered 219

about these lights? They are jewels, fused with radium. You rub them with your thumb to make them glow, and rub them again, the opposite way, to extinguish them. That is but a single example of their science. But much they have forgotten. They take little interest in waking life, choosing to lie most of the time in death-like sleep."

"Then the dead man at the gate –" began Conan.

“Was doubtless slumbering. Sleepers of the lotus are like the dead. Animation is apparently suspended. It is impossible to detect the slightest sign of life. The spirit has left the body and is roaming at will through other, exotic worlds. The man at the gate was a good example of the irresponsibility of these people’s lives. He was guarding the gate, where custom decrees a watch be kept, though no enemy has ever advanced across the desert. In other parts of the city you would find other guards, generally sleeping as soundly as the man at the gate.”

Conan mulled over this for a space.

“Where are the people now?”

“Scattered in different parts of the city; lying on couches, on silken divans, in cushion-littered alcoves, on fur-covered daises; all wrapt in the shining veil of dreams.”

Conan felt the skin twitch between his massive shoulders. It was not soothing to think of hundreds of people lying cold and still throughout the tapestried palaces, their glassy eyes turned unseeingly upward. He remembered something else.

“What of the thing that stole through the chambers and carried away the man on the dais?”

A shudder twitched her ivory limbs.

“That was Thog, the Ancient, the god of Xuthal, who dwells in the sunken dome in the center of the city. He has always dwelt in Xuthal. Whether he came here with the ancient founders, or was here when they built the city, none knows. But the people of Xuthal worship him. Mostly he sleeps below the city, but sometimes at irregular intervals he grows hungry, and then he steals through the secret corridors and the dim-lit chambers, seeking prey. Then none is safe.”

Natala moaned with terror and clasped Conan’s mighty neck as if to resist an effort to drag her from her protector’s side.

“Crom!” he ejaculated aghast. “You mean to tell me these people lie down calmly and sleep, with this demon crawling among them?”

“It is only occasionally that he is hungry,” she repeated. “A god must have his sacrifices. When I was a child in Stygia the people lived under the shadow of the priests. None ever knew when he or she would be seized and dragged to the altar. What difference whether the priests give a victim to the gods, or the god comes for his own victim?”

“Such is not the custom of my people,” Conan growled, “nor of Natala’s either. The Hyborians do not sacrifice humans to their god, Mitra, and as for my people – by Crom, I’d like to see a priest try to drag a Cimmerian to the altar! There’d be blood spilt, but not as the priest intended.”

“You are a barbarian,” laughed Thalis, but with a glow in her luminous eyes. “Thog is very ancient and very terrible.”

“These folk must be either fools or heroes,” grunted Conan, “to lie down and dream their idiotic dreams, knowing they might awaken in his belly.”

She laughed. “They know nothing else. For untold generations Thog has preyed on them. He has been one of the factors which have reduced their numbers from thousands to hundreds. A few more generations and they will be extinct, and Thog must either fare forth into the world for new prey, or retire to the underworld whence he came so long ago.

“They realize their ultimate doom, but they are fatalists, incapable of resistance or escape. Not one of the present generation has been out of sight of these walls. There is an oasis a day’s march to the south – I have seen it on the old maps their ancestors drew on parchment – but no man of Xuthal has visited it for three generations, much less made any attempt to explore the fertile grasslands which the maps show lying another day’s march beyond it. They are a fast-fading race, drowned in lotus-dreams, stimulating their waking hours by means of the golden wine which heals wounds, prolongs life, and invigorates the most sated debauchee.

“Yet they cling to life, and fear the deity they worship. You saw how one went mad at the knowledge that Thog was roving the palaces. I have seen the whole city screaming and tearing its hair, and running frenziedly out of the gates, to cower outside the walls and draw lots to see which would be bound and flung back through the arched doorways to satisfy Thog’s lust and hunger. Were they not all slumbering now, the word of his coming would send them raving and shrieking again through the outer gates.”

“Oh, Conan!” begged Natala hysterically. “Let us flee!”

“In good time,” muttered Conan, his eyes burning on Thalis’ ivory limbs. “What are you, a Stygian woman, doing here?”

“I came here when a young girl,” she answered, leaning lithely back against the velvet divan, and intertwining her slender fingers behind her dusky head. “I am the daughter of a king, no common woman, as you can see by my skin, which is as white as that of your little blond there.

I was abducted by a rebel prince, who, with an army of Kushite bowmen, pushed southward into the wilderness, searching for a land he could make his own. He and all his warriors perished in the desert, but one, before he died, placed me on a camel and walked beside it until he dropped and died in his tracks. The beast wandered on, and I finally passed into delirium from thirst and hunger, and awakened in this city. They told me I had been seen from the walls, early in the dawn, lying senseless beside a dead camel. They went forth and brought me in and revived me with their wonderful golden wine. And only the sight of a woman would have led them to have ventured that far from their walls.

“They were naturally much interested in me, especially the men. As I could not speak their language, they learned to speak mine. They are very quick and able of intellect; they learned my language long before I learned theirs. But they were more interested in me than in my language. I have been, and am, the only thing for which a man of them will forego his lotus-dreams for a space.”

She laughed wickedly, flashing her audacious eyes meaningly at Conan.

“Of course the women are jealous of me,” she continued tranquilly. “They are handsome enough in their yellow-skinned way, but they are dreamy and uncertain as the men, and these latter like me not only for my beauty, but for my reality. I am no dream! Though I have dreamed the dreams of the lotus, I am a normal woman, with earthly emotions and desires.

With such these moon-eyed yellow women can not compare.

“That is why it would be better for you to cut that girl’s throat with your

saber, before the men of Xuthal waken and catch her. They will put her through paces she never dreamed of! She is too soft to endure what I have thrived on. I am a daughter of Luxur, and before I had known fifteen summers I had been led through the temples of Derketo, the dusky goddess, and had been initiated into the mysteries. Not that my first years in Xuthal were years of unmodified pleasure! The people of Xuthal have forgotten more than the priestesses of Derketo ever dreamed. They live only for sensual joys. Dreaming or waking, their lives are filled with exotic ecstasies, beyond the ken of ordinary men."

"Damned degenerates!" growled Conan.

"It is all in the point of view," smiled Thalis lazily.

"Well," he decided, "we're merely wasting time. I can see this is no place for ordinary mortals.

We'll be gone before your morons awake, or Thog comes to devour us. I think the desert would be kinder."

Natala, whose blood had curdled in her veins at Thalis' words, fervently agreed. She could speak Stygian only brokenly, but she understood it well enough. Conan stood up, drawing her up beside him.

"If you'll show us the nearest way out of this city," he grunted, "we'll take ourselves off." But his gaze lingered on the Stygian's sleek limbs and ivory breasts.

She did not miss his look, and she smiled enigmatically as she rose with the lithe ease of a great lazy cat.

"Follow me," she directed and led the way, conscious of Conan's eyes fixed on her supple figure and perfectly poised carriage. She did not go the way they had come, but before Conan's suspicions could be roused, she halted in a wide ivory-chased chamber, and pointed to a tiny fountain which gurgled in the center of the ivory floor.

"Don't you want to wash your face, child?" she asked Natala. "It is stained with dust, and there is dust in your hair."

Natala colored resentfully at the suggestion of malice in the Stygian's faintly mocking tone, but she complied, wondering miserably just how much havoc the desert sun and wind had wrought on her complexion – a feature for which women of her race were justly noted. She knelt beside the fountain, shook back her hair, slipped her tunic down to her waist, and began to lave not only her face, but her white arms and shoulders as well.

"By Crom!" grumbled Conan, "a woman will stop to consider her beauty, if the devil himself were on her heels. Haste, girl; you'll be dusty again before we've got out of sight of this city.

And Thalis, I'd take it kindly if you'd furnish us with a bit of food and drink."

For answer Thalis leaned herself against him, slipping one white arm about his bronzed shoulders. Her sleek naked flank pressed against his thigh and the perfume of her foamy hair was in his nostrils.

"Why dare the desert?" she whispered urgently. "Stay here! I will teach you the ways of Xuthal. I will protect you. I will love you! You are a real man: I am sick of these moon-calves who sigh and dream and wake, and dream again. I am hungry for the hard, clean passion of a man from the earth. The blaze of your dynamic eyes makes my heart pound in my bosom, and the touch of your iron-thewed arm maddens me.

"Stay here! I will make you king of Xuthal! I will show you all the ancient mysteries, and the exotic ways of pleasure! I –" She had thrown both arms about his neck and was standing on tiptoe, her vibrant body shivering against his. Over her ivory shoulder he saw Natala, throwing back her damp tousled hair, stop short, her lovely eyes dilating, her red lips parting in a shocked O. With an embarrassed grunt, Conan disengaged Thalis' clinging arms and put her aside with one massive arm. She threw a swift glance at the Brythunian girl and smiled enigmatically, seeming to nod her splendid head in mysterious cogitation.

Natala rose and jerked up her tunic, her eyes blazing, her lips pouting sulkily. Conan swore under his breath. He was no more monogamous in his nature than the average soldier of fortune, but there was an innate decency about him that was Natala's best protection.

Thalis did not press her suit. Beckoning them with her slender hand to follow, she turned and walked across the chamber. There, close to the tapestried wall, she halted suddenly. Conan, watching her, wondered if she had heard the sounds that might be made by a nameless monster stealing through the midnight chambers, and his skin crawled at the thought.

“What do you hear?” he demanded.

“Watch that doorway,” she replied, pointing.

He wheeled, sword ready. Only the empty arch of the entrance met his gaze. Then behind him sounded a quick faint scuffling noise, a half-choked gasp. He whirled. Thalis and Natala had vanished. The tapestry was settling back in place, as if it had been lifted away from the wall.

As he gaped bewilderedly, from behind that tapestried wall rang a muffled scream in the voice of the Brythunian girl.

II

When Conan turned, in compliance with Thalis’ request, to glare at the doorway opposite, Natala had been standing just behind him, close to the side of the Stygian. The instant the Cimmerian’s back was turned, Thalis, with a pantherish quickness almost incredible, clapped her hand over Natala’s mouth, stifling the cry she tried to give. Simultaneously the Stygian’s other arm was passed about the blond girl’s supple waist, and she was jerked back against the wall, which seemed to give way as Thalis’ shoulder pressed against it. A section of the wall swung inward, and through a slit that opened in the tapestry Thalis slid with her captive, just as Conan wheeled back.

Inside was utter blackness as the secret door swung to again. Thalis paused to fumble at it for an instant, apparently sliding home a bolt, and as she took her hand from Natala’s mouth to perform this act, the Brythunian girl began to scream at the top of her voice. Thalis’ laugh was 224

like poisoned honey in the darkness.

“Scream if you will, little fool. It will only shorten your life.”

At that Natala ceased suddenly, and cowered shaking in every limb.

“Why did you do this?” she begged. “What are you going to do?”

“I am going to take you down this corridor for a short distance,” answered Thalis, “and leave you for one who will sooner or later come for you.”

“Ohhhhhh!” Natala’s voice broke in a sob of terror. “Why should you harm me? I have never injured you!”

“I want your warrior. You stand in my way. He desires me – I could read the look in his eyes.

But for you, he would be willing to stay here and be my king. When you are out of the way, he will follow me.”

“He will cut your throat,” answered Natala with conviction, knowing Conan better than Thalis did.

“We shall see,” answered the Stygian coolly from the confidence of her power over men. “At any rate, you will not know whether he stabs or kisses me, because you will be the bride of him who dwells in darkness. Come!”

Half mad with terror, Natala fought like a wild thing, but it availed her nothing. With a lithe strength she would not have believed possible in a woman, Thalis picked her up and carried her down the black corridor as if she had been a child. Natala did not scream again, remembering the Stygian’s sinister words; the only sounds were her desperate quick panting and Thalis’ soft taunting lascivious laughter. Then the Brythunian’s fluttering hand closed on something in the dark – a jeweled dagger-hilt jutting from Thalis’ gem-crusted girdle. Natala jerked it forth and struck blindly and with all her girlish power.

A scream burst from Thalis’ lips, feline in its pain and fury. She reeled, and Natala slipped from her relaxing grasp, to bruise her tender limbs on the smooth stone floor. Rising, she scurried to the nearest wall and stood there panting and trembling, flattening herself against the stones. She could not see Thalis, but she could hear her. The Stygian was quite certainly not dead. She was cursing in a steady stream, and her fury was so concentrated and deadly that Natala felt her bones turn to wax, her blood to ice.

“Where are you, you little she-devil?” gasped Thalis. “Let me get my fingers on you again, and 225

I'll –" Natala grew physically sick as Thalis described the bodily injuries she intended to inflict on her rival. The Stygian's choice of language would have shamed the toughest courtezan in Aquilonia.

Natala heard her groping in the dark, and then a light sprang up. Evidently whatever fear Thalis felt of this black corridor was submerged in her anger. The light came from one of the radium gems which adorned the walls of Xuthal. This Thalis had rubbed, and now she stood bathed in its reddish glow: a light different from that which the others had emitted. One hand was pressed to her side and blood trickled between the fingers. But she did not seem weakened or badly hurt, and her eyes blazed fiendishly. What little courage remained to Natala ebbed away at sight of the Stygian standing limned in that weird glow, her beautiful face contorted with a passion that was no less than hellish. She now advanced with a pantherish tread, drawing her hand away from her wounded side, and shaking the blood drops impatiently from her fingers.

Natala saw that she had not badly harmed her rival. The blade had glanced from the jewels of Thalis' girdle and inflicted a very superficial flesh-wound, only enough to rouse the Stygian's unbridled fury.

"Give me that dagger, you fool!" she gritted, striding up to the cowering girl.

Natala knew that she ought to fight while she had the chance, but she simply could not summon up the courage. Never much of a fighter, the darkness, violence and horror of her adventure had left her limp, mentally and physically. Thalis snatched the dagger from her lax fingers and threw it contemptuously aside.

"You little slut!" she ground between her teeth, slapping the girl viciously with either hand.

"Before I drag you down the corridor and throw you into Thog's jaws, I'll have a little of your blood myself! You would dare to knife me – well, for that audacity you shall pay!"

Seizing her by the hair, Thalis dragged her down the corridor a short distance, to the edge of the circle of light. A metal ring showed in the wall, above the level of a man's head. From it depended a silken cord. As in a nightmare Natala felt her tunic being stripped from her, and the next instant Thalis had jerked up her wrists and bound them to the ring, where she hung, naked as the day she was born, her feet barely touching the floor. Twisting her head, Natala saw Thalis unhook a jewel-handled whip from where it hung on the wall, near

the ring. The lashes consisted of seven round silk cords, harder yet more pliant than leather thongs.

With a hiss of vindictive gratification, Thalis drew back her arm, and Natala shrieked as the cords curled across her loins. The tortured girl writhed, twisted and tore agonizedly at the thongs which imprisoned her wrists. She had forgotten the lurking menace her cries might summon, and so apparently had Thalis. Every stroke evoked screams of anguish. The 226

whippings Natala had received in the Shemite slave-markets paled to insignificance before this.

She had never guessed the punishing power of hard-woven silk cords. Their caress was more exquisitely painful than any birch twigs or leather thongs. They whistled venomously as they cut the air.

Then, as Natala twisted her tear-stained face over her shoulder to shriek for mercy, something froze her cries. Agony gave place to paralyzing horror in her beautiful eyes.

Struck by her expression, Thalis checked her lifted hand and whirled quick as a cat. Too late!

An awful cry rang from her lips as she swayed back, her arms upflung. Natala saw her for an instant, a white figure of fear etched against a great black shapeless mass that towered over her; then the white figure was whipped off its feet, the shadow receded with it, and in the circle of dim light Natala hung alone, half fainting with terror.

From the black shadows came sounds, incomprehensible and blood-freezing. She heard Thalis’

voice pleading frenziedly, but no voice answered. There was no sound except the Stygian’s panting voice, which suddenly rose to screams of agony, and then broke in hysterical laughter, mingled with sobs. This dwindled to a convulsive panting, and presently this too ceased, and a silence more terrible hovered over the secret corridor.

Nauseated with horror, Natala twisted about and dared to look fearfully in the direction the black shape had carried Thalis. She saw nothing, but she sensed an unseen peril, more grisly than she could understand. She fought against a

rising tide of hysteria. Her bruised wrists, her smarting body were forgotten in the teeth of this menace which she dimly felt threatened not only her body, but her soul as well.

She strained her eyes into the blackness beyond the rim of the dim light, tense with fear of what she might see. A whimpering gasp escaped her lips. The darkness was taking form. Something huge and bulky grew up out of the void. She saw a giant misshapen head emerging into the light. At least she took it for a head, though it was not the member of any sane or normal creature. She saw a great toad-like face, the features of which were as dim and unstable as those of a specter seen in a mirror of nightmare. Great pools of light that might have been eyes blinked at her, and she shook at the cosmic lust reflected there. She could tell nothing about the creature's body. Its outline seemed to waver and alter subtly even as she looked at it; yet its substance was apparently solid enough. There was nothing misty or ghostly about it.

As it came toward her, she could not tell whether it walked, wriggled, flew or crept. Its method of locomotion was absolutely beyond her comprehension. When it had emerged from the shadows she was still uncertain as to its nature. The light from the radium gem did not illumine it as it would have illumined an ordinary creature. Impossible as it seemed, the being seemed 227

almost impervious to the light. Its details were still obscure and indistinct, even when it halted so near that it almost touched her shrinking flesh. Only the blinking toad-like face stood out with any distinctness. The thing was a blur in the sight, a black blot of shadow that normal radiance would neither dissipate nor illuminate.

She decided she was mad, because she could not tell whether the being looked up at her or towered above her. She was unable to say whether the dim repulsive face blinked up at her from the shadows at her feet, or looked down at her from an immense height. But if her sight convinced her that whatever its mutable qualities, it was yet composed of solid substance, her sense of feel further assured her of that fact. A dark tentacle-like member slid about her body, and she screamed at the touch of it on her naked flesh. It was neither warm nor cold, rough nor smooth; it was like nothing that had ever touched her before, and at its caress she knew such fear and shame as she had never dreamed of. All the obscenity and salacious infamy spawned in the muck of the abysmal pits of Life seemed to drown her in seas of cosmic filth. And in that instant she knew that whatever form of life this thing represented it was

not a beast.

She began to scream uncontrollably, the monster tugged at her as if to tear her from the ring by sheer brutality; then something crashed above their heads, and a form hurtled down through the air to strike the stone floor.

III

When Conan wheeled to see the tapestry settling back in place and to hear Natala's muffled cry, he hurled himself against the wall with a maddened roar. Rebounding from the impact that would have splintered the bones of a lesser man, he ripped away the tapestry, revealing what appeared to be a blank wall. Beside himself with fury he lifted his saber as though to hew through the marble, when a sudden sound brought him about, eyes blazing.

A score of figures faced him, yellow men in purple tunics, with short swords in their hands. As he turned they surged in on him with hostile cries. He made no attempt to conciliate them.

Maddened at the disappearance of his sweetheart, the barbarian reverted to type.

A snarl of bloodthirsty gratification hummed in his bull-throat as he leaped, and the first attacker, his short sword overreached by the whistling saber, went down with his brains gushing from his split skull. Wheeling like a cat, Conan caught a descending wrist on his edge, and the hand gripping the short sword flew into the air scattering a shower of red drops. But Conan had not paused or hesitated. A pantherish twist and shift of his body avoided the blundering rush of two yellow swordsmen, and the blade of one, missing its objective, was sheathed in the breast of the other.

A yell of dismay went up at this mischance, and Conan allowed himself a short bark of 228

laughter as he bounded aside from a whistling cut and slashed under the guard of yet another man of Xuthal. A long spurt of crimson followed his singing edge and the man crumpled screaming, his belly-muscles cut through.

The warriors of Xuthal howled like mad wolves. Unaccustomed to battle, they were ridiculously slow and clumsy compared to the tigerish barbarian whose motions were blurs of quickness possible only to steel thews knit to a perfect

fighting-brain. They floundered and stumbled, hindered by their own numbers; they struck too quick or too soon, and cut only empty air. He was never motionless or in the same place an instant; springing, side-stepping, whirling, twisting, he offered a constantly shifting target for their swords, while his own curved blade sang death about their ears.

But whatever their faults, the men of Xuthal did not lack courage. They swarmed about him yelling and hacking, and through the arched doorways rushed others, awakened from their slumbers by the unwonted clamor.

Conan, bleeding from a cut on the temple, cleared a space for an instant with a devastating sweep of his dripping saber, and cast a quick glance about for an avenue of escape. At that instant he saw the tapestry on one of the walls drawn aside, disclosing a narrow stairway. On this stood a man in rich robes, vague-eyed and blinking, as if he had just awakened and had not yet shaken the dusts of slumber from his brain. Conan's sight and action were simultaneous.

A tigerish leap carried him untouched through the hemming ring of swords, and he bounded toward the stair with the pack giving tongue behind him. Three men confronted him at the foot of the marble steps, and he struck them with a deafening crash of steel. There was a frenzied instant when the blades flamed like summer lightning; then the group fell apart and Conan sprang up the stair. The oncoming horde tripped over three writhing forms at its foot: one lay face-down in a sickening welter of blood and brains; another propped himself on his hands, blood spurting blackly from his severed throat veins; the other howled like a dying dog as he clawed at the crimson stump that had been an arm.

As Conan rushed up the marble stair, the man above shook himself from his stupor and drew a sword that sparkled frostily in the radium light. He thrust downward as the barbarian surged upon him. But as the point sang toward his throat, Conan ducked deeply. The blade slit the skin of his back, and Conan straightened, driving his saber upward as a man might wield a butcher-knife, with all the power of his mighty shoulders.

So terrific was his headlong drive that the sinking of the saber to the hilt into the belly of his enemy did not check him. He caromed against the wretch's body, knocking it sidewise. The impact sent Conan crashing against the wall; the other, the saber torn through his body, fell headlong down the stair, ripped open to the spine from groin to broken breastbone. In a ghastly mess of streaming entrails the body tumbled against the men rushing up the stairs,

them back with it.

Half stunned, Conan leaned against the wall an instant, glaring down upon them; then with a defiant shake of his dripping saber, he bounded up the steps.

Coming into an upper chamber, he halted only long enough to see that it was empty. Behind him the horde was yelling with such intensified horror and rage, that he knew he had killed some notable man there on the stair, probably the king of that fantastic city.

He ran at random, without plan. He desperately wished to find and succor Natala, who he was sure needed aid badly; but harried as he was by all the warriors in Xuthal, he could only run on, trusting to luck to elude them and find her. Among those dark or dimly lighted upper chambers he quickly lost all sense of direction, and it was not strange that he eventually blundered into a chamber into which his foes were just pouring.

They yelled vengefully and rushed for him, and with a snarl of disgust he turned and fled back the way he had come. At least he thought it was the way he had come. But presently, racing into a particularly ornate chamber, he was aware of his mistake. All the chambers he had traversed since mounting the stair had been empty. This chamber had an occupant, who rose up with a cry as he charged in.

Conan saw a yellow-skinned woman, loaded with jeweled ornaments but otherwise nude, staring at him with wide eyes. So much he glimpsed as she raised her hand and jerked a silken rope hanging from the wall. Then the floor dropped from under him, and all his steel-trap coordination could not save him from the plunge into the black depths that opened beneath him.

He did not fall any great distance, though it was far enough to have snapped the leg bones of a man not built of steel springs and whalebone.

He hit cat-like on his feet and one hand, instinctively retaining his grasp on his saber hilt. A familiar cry rang in his ears as he rebounded on his feet as a lynx rebounds with snarling bared fangs. So Conan, glaring from under his tousled mane, saw the white naked figure of Natala writhing in the lustful grasp of a black nightmare shape that could have only been bred in the lost pits of hell.

The sight of that awful shape alone might have frozen the Cimmerian with fear. In juxtaposition to his girl, the sight sent a red wave of murderous fury through Conan’s brain. In a crimson mist he smote the monster.

It dropped the girl, wheeling toward its attacker, and the maddened Cimmerian’s saber, shrilling through the air, sheared clear through the black viscous bulk and rang on the stone floor, showering blue sparks. Conan went to his knees from the fury of the blow; the edge had not encountered the resistance he had expected. As he bounded up, the thing was upon him.

It towered above him like a clinging black cloud. It seemed to flow about him in almost liquid waves, to envelop and engulf him. His madly slashing saber sheared through it again and again, his ripping poniard tore and rent it; he was deluged with a slimy liquid that must have been its sluggish blood. Yet its fury was nowise abated.

He could not tell whether he was slashing off its members or whether he was cleaving its bulk, which knit behind the slicing blade. He was tossed to and fro in the violence of that awful battle, and had a dazed feeling that he was fighting not one, but an aggregation of lethal creatures. The thing seemed to be biting, clawing, crushing and clubbing him all at the same time. He felt fangs and talons rend his flesh; flabby cables that were yet hard as iron encircled his limbs and body, and worse than all, something like a whip of scorpions fell again and again across his shoulders, back and breast, tearing the skin and filling his veins with a poison that was like liquid fire.

They had rolled beyond the circle of light, and it was in utter blackness that the Cimmerian battled. Once he sank his teeth, beast-like, into the flabby substance of his foe, revolting as the stuff writhed and squirmed like living rubber from between his iron jaws.

In that hurricane of battle they were rolling over and over, farther and farther down the tunnel.

Conan’s brain reeled with the punishment he was taking. His breath came in whistling gasps between his teeth. High above him he saw a great toad-like face, dimly limned in an eery glow that seemed to emanate from it. And with a panting cry that was half curse, half gasp of straining agony, he lunged toward it, thrusting with all his waning power. Hilt-deep the saber sank,

somewhere below the grisly face, and a convulsive shudder heaved the vast bulk that half enveloped the Cimmerian. With a volcanic burst of contraction and expansion, it tumbled backward, rolling now with frantic haste down the corridor. Conan went with it, bruised, battered, invincible, hanging on like a bulldog to the hilt of his saber which he could not withdraw, tearing and ripping at the shuddering bulk with the poniard in his left hand, goring it to ribbons.

The thing glowed all over now with a weird phosphorous radiance, and this glow was in Conan's eyes, blinding him, as suddenly the heaving billowing mass fell away from beneath him, the saber tearing loose and remaining in his locked hand. This hand and arm hung down into space, and far below him the glowing body of the monster was rushing downward like a 231

meteor. Conan dazedly realized that he lay on the brink of a great round well, the edge of which was slimy stone. He lay there watching the hurtling glow dwindling and dwindling until it vanished into a dark shining surface that seemed to surge upward to meet it. For an instant a dimming witchfire glimmered in those dusky depths; then it disappeared and Conan lay staring down into the blackness of the ultimate abyss from which no sound came.

IV

Straining vainly at the silk cords which cut into her wrists, Natala sought to pierce the darkness beyond the radiant circle. Her tongue seemed frozen to the roof of her mouth. Into that blackness she had seen Conan vanish, locked in mortal combat with the unknown demon, and the only sounds that had come to her straining ears had been the panting gasps of the barbarian, the impact of struggling bodies, and the thud and rip of savage blows. These ceased, and Natala swayed dizzily on her cords, half fainting.

A footstep roused her out of her apathy of horror, to see Conan emerging from the darkness. At the sight she found her voice in a shriek which echoed down the vaulted tunnel. The manhandling the Cimmerian had received was appalling to behold. At every step he dripped blood. His face was skinned and bruised as if he had been beaten with a bludgeon. His lips were pulped, and blood oozed down his face from a wound in his scalp. There were deep gashes in his thighs, calves and forearms, and great bruises showed on his limbs and body from impacts against the stone floor. But his shoulders, back and upper-breast muscles had suffered most. The flesh was bruised, swollen and lacerated, the skin hanging in loose strips, as if he had been lashed with

wire whips.

“Oh, Conan!” she sobbed. “What has happened to you?”

He had no breath for conversation, but his smashed lips writhed in what might have been grim humor as he approached her. His hairy breast, glistening with sweat and blood, heaved with his panting. Slowly and laboriously he reached up and cut her cords, then fell back against the wall and leaned there, his trembling legs braced wide. She scrambled up from where she had fallen and caught him in a frenzied embrace, sobbing hysterically.

“Oh, Conan, you are wounded unto death! Oh, what shall we do?”

“Well,” he panted, “you can’t fight a devil out of hell and come off with a whole skin!”

“Where is *It* ?” she whispered. “Did you kill it?”

“I don’t know. It fell into a pit. It was hanging in bloody shreds, but whether it can be killed by steel I know not.”

“Oh, your poor back!” she wailed, wringing her hands.

“It lashed me with a tentacle,” he grimaced, swearing as he moved. “It cut like wire and burned like poison. But it was its damnable squeezing that got my wind. It was worse than a python. If half my guts are not mashed out of place, I’m much mistaken.”

“What shall we do?” she whimpered.

He glanced up. The trap was closed. No sound came from above.

“We can’t go back through the secret door,” he muttered. “That room is full of dead men, and doubtless warriors keep watch there. They must have thought my doom sealed when I plunged through the floor above, or else they dare not follow me into this tunnel. – Twist that radium gem off the wall. – As I groped my way back up the corridor I felt arches opening into other tunnels. We’ll follow the first we come to. It may lead to another pit, or to the open air. We must chance it. We can’t stay here and rot.”

Natala obeyed, and holding the tiny point of light in his left hand and his bloody saber in his right, Conan started down the corridor. He went slowly, stiffly, only his animal vitality keeping him on his feet. There was a blank glare in his bloodshot eyes, and Natala saw him involuntarily lick his battered lips from time to time. She knew his suffering was ghastly, but with the stoicism of the wilds he made no complaint.

Presently the dim light shone on a black arch, and into this Conan turned. Natala cringed at what she might see, but the light revealed only a tunnel similar to that they had just left.

How far they went she had no idea, before they mounted a long stair and came upon a stone door, fastened with a golden bolt.

She hesitated, glancing at Conan. The barbarian was swaying on his feet, the light in his unsteady hand flinging fantastic shadows back and forth along the wall.

“Open the door, girl,” he muttered thickly. “The men of Xuthal will be waiting for us, and I would not disappoint them. By Crom, the city has not seen such a sacrifice as I will make!”

She knew he was half delirious. No sound came from beyond the door. Taking the radium gem from his blood-stained hand, she threw the bolt and drew the panel inward. The inner side of a cloth-of-gold tapestry met her gaze and she drew it aside and peeked through, her heart in her mouth. She was looking into an empty chamber in the center of which a silvery fountain 233

tinkled.

Conan’s hand fell heavily on her naked shoulder.

“Stand aside, girl,” he mumbled. “Now is the feasting of swords.”

“There is no one in the chamber,” she answered. “But there is water–”

“I hear it.” He licked his blackened lips. “We will drink before we die.”

He seemed blinded. She took his darkly stained hand and led him through the stone door. She went on tiptoe, expecting a rush of yellow figures through the arches at any instant.

“Drink while I keep watch,” he muttered.

“No, I am not thirsty. Lie down beside the fountain and I will bathe your wounds.”

“What of the swords of Xuthal?” He continually raked his arm across his eyes as if to clear his blurred sight.

“I hear no one. All is silent.”

He sank down gropingly and plunged his face into the crystal jet, drinking as if he could not get enough. When he raised his head there was sanity in his bloodshot eyes and he stretched his massive limbs out on the marble floor as she requested, though he kept his saber in his hand, and his eyes continually roved toward the archways. She bathed his torn flesh and bandaged the deeper wounds with strips torn from a silk hanging. She shuddered at the appearance of his back; the flesh was discolored, mottled and spotted black and blue and a sickly yellow, where it was not raw. As she worked she sought frantically for a solution to their problem. If they stayed where they were, they would eventually be discovered. Whether the men of Xuthal were searching the palaces for them, or had returned to their dreams, she could not know.

As she finished her task, she froze. Under the hanging that partly concealed an alcove, she saw a hand’s breadth of yellow flesh.

Saying nothing to Conan, she rose and crossed the chamber softly, grasping his poniard. Her heart pounded suffocatingly as she cautiously drew aside the hanging. On the dais lay a young yellow woman, naked and apparently lifeless. At her hand stood a jade jar nearly full of peculiar golden-colored liquid. Natala believed it to be the elixir described by Thalis, which lent vigor and vitality to the degenerate Xuthal. She leaned across the supine form and grasped the vessel, her poniard poised over the girl’s bosom. The latter did not wake.

With the jar in her possession, Natala hesitated, realizing it would be the safer course to put the sleeping girl beyond the power of waking and raising an alarm. But she could not bring herself to plunge the Cimmerian poniard into that still bosom, and at last she drew back the hanging and returned to Conan, who lay where she had left him, seemingly only partly conscious.

She bent and placed the jar to his lips. He drank, mechanically at first, then with a suddenly roused interest. To her amazement he sat up and took the vessel from her hands. When he lifted his face, his eyes were clear and normal. Much of the drawn haggard look had gone from his features, and his voice was not the mumble of delirium.

“Crom! Where did you get this?”

She pointed. “From that alcove, where a yellow hussy is sleeping.”

He thrust his muzzle again into the golden liquid.

“By Crom,” he said with a deep sigh, “I feel new life and power rush like wildfire through my veins. Surely this is the very elixir of Life!”

He rose, picking up his saber.

“We had best go back into the corridor,” Natala ventured nervously. “We shall be discovered if we stay here long. We can hide there until your wounds heal _”

“Not I!” he grunted. “We are not rats, to hide in dark burrows. We leave this devil-city now, and let none seek to stop us.”

“But your wounds!” she wailed.

“I do not feel them,” he answered. “It may be a false strength this liquor has given me, but I swear I am aware of neither pain nor weakness.”

With sudden purpose he crossed the chamber to a window she had not noticed. Over his shoulder she looked out. A cool breeze tossed her tousled locks. Above was the dark velvet sky, clustered with stars. Below them stretched a vague expanse of sand.

“Thalis said the city was one great palace,” said Conan. “Evidently some of the chambers are built like towers on the wall. This one is. Chance has led us well.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, glancing apprehensively over her shoulder.

“There is a crystal jar on that ivory table,” he answered. “Fill it with water and tie a strip of that torn hanging about its neck for a handle while I rip up this tapestry.”

She obeyed without question, and when she turned from her task she saw Conan rapidly tying together the long tough strips of silk to make a rope, one end of which he fastened to the leg of the massive ivory table.

“We’ll take our chance with the desert,” said he. “Thalis spoke of an oasis a day’s march to the south, and grasslands beyond that. If we reach the oasis we can rest until my wounds heal. This wine is like sorcery. A little while ago I was little more than a dead man; now I am ready for anything. Here is enough silk left for you to make a garment of.”

Natala had forgotten her nudity. The mere fact caused her no qualms, but her delicate skin would need protection from the desert sun. As she knotted the silk length about her supple body, Conan turned to the window and with a contemptuous wrench tore away the soft gold bars that guarded it. Then, looping the loose end of his silk rope about Natala’s hips, and cautioning her to hold on with both hands, he lifted her through the window and lowered her the thirty-odd feet to the earth. She stepped out of the loop, and drawing it back up, he made fast the vessels of water and wine, and lowered them to her. He followed them, sliding down swiftly, hand over hand.

As he reached her side, Natala gave a sigh of relief. They stood alone at the foot of the great wall, the paling stars overhead and the naked desert about them. What perils yet confronted them she could not know, but her heart sang with joy because they were out of that ghostly, unreal city.

“They may find the rope,” grunted Conan, slinging the precious jars across his shoulders, wincing at the contact with his mangled flesh. “They may even pursue us, but from what Thalis said, I doubt it. That way is south,” a bronze muscular arm indicated their course; “so somewhere in that direction lies the oasis. Come!”

Taking her hand with a thoughtfulness unusual for him, Conan strode out across the sands, suiting his stride to the shorter legs of his companion. He did not glance back at the silent city, brooding dreamily and ghostlily behind them.

“Conan,” Natala ventured finally, “when you fought the monster, and later, as you came up the corridor, did you see anything of – of Thalis?”

He shook his head. “It was dark in the corridor; but it was empty.”

She shuddered. “She tortured me – yet I pity her.”

“It was a hot welcome we got in that accursed city,” he snarled. Then his grim humor returned.

“Well, they’ll remember our visit long enough, I’ll wager. There are brains and guts and blood to be cleaned off the marble tiles, and if their god still lives, he carries more wounds than I. We got off light, after all: we have wine and water and a good chance of reaching a habitable country, though I look as if I’d gone through a meat-grinder, and you have a sore –”

“It’s all your fault,” she interrupted. “If you had not looked so long and admiringly at that Stygian cat –”

“Crom and his devils!” he swore. “When the oceans drown the world, women will take time for jealousy. Devil take their conceit! Did I tell the Stygian to fall in love with me? After all, she was only human!”

The Pool of the Black One

The Pool of the Black One

Into the west, unknown of man,

Ships have sailed since the world began.

Read, if you dare, what Skelos wrote,

With dead hands fumbling his silken coat;

And follow the ships through the wind-blown wrack –

Follow the ships that come not back.

Sancha, once of Kordava, yawned daintily, stretched her supple limbs luxuriously, and composed herself more comfortably on the ermine-fringed silk spread on the carack's poop-deck. That the crew watched her with burning interest from waist and forecastle she was lazily aware, just as she was also aware that her short silk kirtle veiled little of her voluptuous contours from their eager eyes. Wherefore she smiled insolently and prepared to snatch a few more winks before the sun, which was just thrusting his golden disk above the ocean, should dazzle her eyes.

But at that instant a sound reached her ears unlike the creaking of timbers, thrum of cordage and lap of waves. She sat up, her gaze fixed on the rail, over which, to her amazement, a dripping figure clambered. Her dark eyes opened wide, her red lips parted in an O of surprize.

The intruder was a stranger to her. Water ran in rivulets from his great shoulders and down his heavy arms. His single garment – a pair of bright crimson silk breeks – was soaking wet, as was his broad gold-buckled girdle and the sheathed sword it supported. As he stood at the rail, the rising sun etched him like a great bronze statue. He ran his fingers through his streaming black mane, and his blue eyes lit as they rested on the girl.

"Who are you?" she demanded. "Whence did you come?"

He made a gesture toward the sea that took in a whole quarter of the compass, while his eyes did not leave her supple figure.

"Are you a merman, that you rise up out of the sea?" she asked, confused by the candor of his gaze, though she was accustomed to admiration.

Before he could reply, a quick step sounded on the boards, and the master of the carack was glaring at the stranger, fingers twitching at sword-hilt.

"Who the devil are you, sirrah?" this one demanded in no friendly tone.

"I am Conan," the other answered imperturbably. Sancha pricked up her ears anew; she had never heard Zingaran spoken with such an accent as the stranger spoke it.

"And how did you get aboard my ship?" The voice grated with suspicion.

“I swam.”

“Swam!” exclaimed the master angrily. “Dog, would you jest with me? We are far beyond sight of land. Whence do you come?”

Conan pointed with a muscular brown arm toward the east, banded in dazzling gold by the lifting sun.

“I came from the Islands.”

“Oh!” The other regarded him with increased interest. Black brows drew down over scowling eyes, and the thin lip lifted unpleasantly.

“So you are one of those dogs of the Barachans.”

A faint smile touched Conan’s lips.

“And do you know who I am?” his questioner demanded.

“This ship is the *Wastrel* ; so you must be Zaporavo.”

“Aye!” It touched the captain’s grim vanity that the man should know him. He was a tall man, tall as Conan, though of leaner build. Framed in his steel morion his face was dark, saturnine and hawk-like, wherefore men called him the Hawk. His armor and garments were rich and ornate, after the fashion of a Zingaran grandee. His hand was never far from his sword-hilt.

There was little favor in the gaze he bent on Conan. Little love was lost between the Zingaran 239

renegades and the outlaws who infested the Baracha Islands off the southern coast of Zingara.

These men were mostly sailors from Argos, with a sprinkling of other nationalities. They raided the shipping, and harried the Zingaran coast towns, just as the Zingaran buccaneers did, but these dignified their profession by calling themselves Freebooters, while they dubbed the Barachans pirates. They were neither the first nor the last to gild the name of thief.

Some of these thoughts passed through Zaporavo’s mind as he toyed with his sword-hilt and scowled at his uninvited guest. Conan gave no hint of what his own thoughts might be. He stood with folded arms as placidly as if upon his

own deck; his lips smiled and his eyes were untroubled.

“What are you doing here?” the Freebooter demanded abruptly.

“I found it necessary to leave the rendezvous at Tortage before moonrise last night,” answered Conan. “I departed in a leaky boat, and rowed and bailed all night. Just at dawn I saw your topsails, and left the miserable tub to sink, while I made better speed in the water.”

“There are sharks in these waters,” growled Zaporavo, and was vaguely irritated by the answering shrug of the mighty shoulders. A glance toward the waist showed a screen of eager faces staring upward. A word would send them leaping up on the poop in a storm of swords that would overwhelm even such a fighting-man as the stranger looked to be.

“Why should I burden myself with every nameless vagabond the sea casts up?”snarled Zaporavo, his look and manner more insulting than his words.

“A ship can always use another good sailor,” answered the other without resentment. Zaporavo scowled, knowing the truth of that assertion. He hesitated, and doing so, lost his ship, his command, his girl, and his life. But of course he could not see into the future, and to him Conan was only another wastrel, cast up, as he put it, by the sea. He did not like the man; yet the fellow had given him no provocation. His manner was not insolent, though rather more confident than Zaporavo liked to see.

“You’ll work for your keep,” snarled the Hawk. “Get off the poop. And remember, the only law here is my will.”

The smile seemed to broaden on Conan’s thin lips. Without hesitation but without haste he turned and descended into the waist. He did not look again at Sancha, who, during the brief conversation, had watched eagerly, all eyes and ears.

As he came into the waist the crew thronged about him – Zingarans, all of them, half naked, their gaudy silk garments splashed with tar, jewels glinting in ear-rings and dagger-hilts. They were eager for the time-honored sport of baiting the stranger. Here he would be tested, and his future status in the crew decided. Up on the poop Zaporavo had apparently already forgotten the

stranger’s existence, but Sancha watched, tense with interest. She had become familiar with such scenes, and knew the baiting would be brutal and probably bloody.

But her familiarity with such matters was scanty compared to that of Conan. He smiled faintly as he came into the waist and saw the menacing figures pressing truculently about him. He paused and eyed the ring inscrutably, his composure unshaken. There was a certain code about these things. If he had attacked the captain, the whole crew would have been at his throat, but they would give him a fair chance against the one selected to push the brawl.

The man chosen for this duty thrust himself forward – a wiry brute, with a crimson sash knotted about his head like a turban. His lean chin jutted out, his scarred face was evil beyond belief. Every glance, each swaggering movement was an affront. His way of beginning the baiting was as primitive, raw and crude as himself.

“Baracha, eh?” he sneered. “That’s where they raise dogs for men. We of the Fellowship spit on ’em – like this!”

He spat in Conan’s face and snatched at his own sword.

The Barachan’s movement was too quick for the eye to follow. His sledge-like fist crunched with a terrible impact against his tormenter’s jaw, and the Zingaran catapulted through the air and fell in a crumpled heap by the rail.

Conan turned toward the others. But for a slumbering glitter in his eyes, his bearing was unchanged. But the baiting was over as suddenly as it had begun. The seamen lifted their companion; his broken jaw hung slack, his head lolled unnaturally.

“By Mitra, his neck’s broken!” swore a black-bearded sea-rogue.

“You Freebooters are a weak-boned race,” laughed the pirate. “On the Barachas we take no account of such taps as that. Will you play at sword-strokes, now, any of you? No? Then all’s well, and we’re friends, eh?”

There were plenty of tongues to assure him that he spoke truth. Brawny arms swung the dead man over the rail, and a dozen fins cut the water as he sank. Conan laughed and spread his mighty arms as a great cat might stretch itself, and his gaze sought the deck above. Sancha leaned over the rail, red lips parted, dark eyes aglow with interest. The sun behind her outlined 241

her lithe figure through the light kirtle which its glow made transparent. Then across her fell Zaporavo's scowling shadow and a heavy hand fell possessively on her slim shoulder. There were menace and meaning in the glare he bent on the man in the waist; Conan grinned back, as if at a jest none knew but himself.

Zaporavo made the mistake so many autocrats make; alone in somber grandeur on the poop, he under-estimated the man below him. He had his opportunity to kill Conan, and he let it pass, engrossed in his own gloomy ruminations. He did not find it easy to think any of the dogs beneath his feet constituted a menace to him. He had stood in the high places so long, and had ground so many foes underfoot, that he unconsciously assumed himself to be above the machinations of inferior rivals.

Conan, indeed, gave him no provocation. He mixed with the crew, lived and made merry as they did. He proved himself a skilled sailor, and by far the strongest man any of them had seen.

He did the work of three men, and was always first to spring to any heavy or dangerous task.

His mates began to rely upon him. He did not quarrel with them, and they were careful not to quarrel with him. He gambled with them, putting up his girdle and sheath for a stake, won their money and weapons, and gave them back with a laugh. The crew instinctively looked toward him as the leader of the forecastle. He vouchsafed no information as to what had caused him to flee the Barachas, but the knowledge that he was capable of a deed bloody enough to have exiled him from that wild band increased the respect felt toward him by the fierce Freebooters.

Toward Zaporavo and the mates he was imperturbably courteous, never insolent or servile.

The dullest was struck by the contrast between the harsh, taciturn, gloomy commander, and the pirate whose laugh was gusty and ready, who roared ribald songs in a dozen languages, guzzled ale like a toper, and—apparently—had no thought for the morrow.

Had Zaporavo known he was being compared, even though unconsciously, with a man before the mast, he would have been speechless with amazed anger. But he was engrossed with his broodings, which had become blacker

and grimmer as the years crawled by, and with his vague grandiose dreams; and with the girl whose possession was a bitter pleasure, just as all his pleasures were.

And she looked more and more at the black-maned giant who towered among his mates at work or play. He never spoke to her, but there was no mistaking the candor of his gaze. She did not mistake it, and she wondered if she dared the perilous game of leading him on.

No great length of time lay between her and the palaces of Kordava, but it was as if a world of change separated her from the life she had lived before Zaporavo tore her screaming from the flaming caravel his wolves had plundered. She, who had been the spoiled and petted daughter 242

of the Duke of Kordava, learned what it was to be a buccaneer's plaything, and because she was supple enough to bend without breaking, she lived where other women had died, and because she was young and vibrant with life, she came to find pleasure in the existence.

The life was uncertain, dream-like, with sharp contrasts of battle, pillage, murder, and flight.

Zaporavo's red visions made it even more uncertain than that of the average freebooter. No one knew what he planned next. Now they had left all charted coasts behind and were plunging further and further into that unknown billowy waste ordinarily shunned by seafarers, and into which, since the beginnings of Time, ships had ventured, only to vanish from the sight of man for ever. All known lands lay behind them, and day upon day the blue surging immensity lay empty to their sight. Here there was no loot – no towns to sack nor ships to burn. The men murmured, though they did not let their murmurings reach the ears of their implacable master, who tramped the poop day and night in gloomy majesty, or pored over ancient charts and time-yellowed maps, reading in tomes that were crumbling masses of worm-eaten parchment. At times he talked to Sancha, wildly it seemed to her, of lost continents, and fabulous isles dreaming unguessed amidst the blue foam of nameless gulfs, where horned dragons guarded treasures gathered by pre-human kings, long, long ago.

Sancha listened, uncomprehending, hugging her slim knees, her thoughts constantly roving away from the words of her grim companion back to a clean-limbed bronze giant whose laughter was gusty and elemental as the sea-

wind.

So, after many weary weeks, they raised land to westward, and at dawn dropped anchor in a shallow bay, and saw a beach which was like a white band bordering an expanse of gentle grassy slopes, masked by green trees. The wind brought scents of fresh vegetation and spices, and Sancha clapped her hands with glee at the prospect of adventuring ashore. But her eagerness turned to sulkiness when Zaporavo ordered her to remain aboard until he sent for her. He never gave any explanation for his commands; so she never knew his reason, unless it was the lurking devil in him that frequently made him hurt her without cause.

So she lounged sulkily on the poop and watched the men row ashore through the calm water that sparkled like liquid jade in the morning sunlight. She saw them bunch together on the sands, suspicious, weapons ready, while several scattered out through the trees that fringed the beach. Among these, she noted, was Conan. There was no mistaking that tall brown figure with its springy step. Men said he was no civilized man at all, but a Cimmerian, one of those barbaric tribesmen who dwelt in the gray hills of the far North, and whose raids struck terror in their southron neighbors. At least, she knew that there was something about him, some super-vitality or barbarism that set him apart from his wild mates.

Voices echoed along the shore, as the silence reassured the buccaneers. The clusters broke up, as men scattered along the beach in search of fruit. She saw them climbing and plucking among the trees, and her pretty mouth watered. She stamped a little foot and swore with a proficiency 243

acquired by association with her blasphemous companions.

The men on shore had indeed found fruit, and were gorging on it, finding one unknown golden-skinned variety especially luscious. But Zaporavo did not seek or eat fruit. His scouts having found nothing indicating men or beasts in the neighborhood, he stood staring inland, at the long reaches of grassy slopes melting into one another. Then, with a brief word, he shifted his swordbelt and strode in under the trees. His mate expostulated with him against going alone, and was rewarded by a savage blow in the mouth. Zaporavo had his reasons for wishing to go alone. He desired to learn if this island were indeed that mentioned in the mysterious *Book of Skelos*, whereon, nameless sages aver, strange monsters guard crypts filled with hieroglyph-carven gold. Nor, for murky reasons of his own, did he wish to share his knowledge, if it were

true, with any one, much less his own crew.

Sancha, watching eagerly from the poop, saw him vanish into the leafy fastness. Presently she saw Conan, the Barachan, turn, glance briefly at the men scattered up and down the beach; then the pirate went quickly in the direction taken by Zaporavo, and likewise vanished among the trees.

Sancha's curiosity was piqued. She waited for them to reappear, but they did not. The seamen still moved aimlessly up and down the beach, and some had wandered inland. Many had lain down in the shade to sleep. Time passed, and she fidgeted about restlessly. The sun began to beat down hotly, in spite of the canopy above the poop-deck. Here it was warm, silent, draggingly monotonous; a few yards away across a band of blue shallow water, the cool shady mystery of tree-fringed beach and woodland-dotted meadow beckoned her. Moreover, the mystery concerning Zaporavo and Conan tempted her.

She well knew the penalty for disobeying her merciless master, and she sat for some time, squirming with indecision. At last she decided that it was worth even one of Zaporavo's whippings to play truant, and with no more ado she kicked off her soft leather sandals, slipped out of her kirtle and stood up on the deck naked as Eve. Clambering over the rail and down the chains, she slid into the water and swam ashore. She stood on the beach a few moments, squirming as the sands tickled her small toes, while she looked for the crew. She saw only a few, at some distance up or down the beach. Many were fast asleep under the trees, bits of golden fruit still clutched in their fingers. She wondered why they should sleep so soundly, so early in the day.

None hailed her as she crossed the white girdle of sand and entered the shade of the woodland.

The trees, she found, grew in irregular clusters, and between these groves stretched rolling expanses of meadow-like slopes. As she progressed inland, in the direction taken by Zaporavo, she was entranced by the green vistas that unfolded gently before her, soft slope beyond slope, 244

carpeted with green sward and dotted with groves. Between the slopes lay gentle declivities, likewise swarded. The scenery seemed to melt into itself, or each scene into the other; the view was singular, at once broad and restricted. Over all a dreamy silence lay like an enchantment.

Then she came suddenly onto the level summit of a slope, circled with tall

trees, and the dreamily faery-like sensation vanished abruptly at the sight of what lay on the reddened and trampled grass. Sancha involuntarily cried out and recoiled, then stole forward, wide-eyed, trembling in every limb.

It was Zaporavo who lay there on the sward, staring sightlessly upward, a gaping wound in his breast. His sword lay near his nerveless hand. The Hawk had made his last swoop.

It is not to be said that Sancha gazed on the corpse of her lord without emotion. She had no cause to love him, yet she felt at least the sensation any girl might feel when looking on the body of the man who was first to possess her. She did not weep or feel any need of weeping, but she was seized by a strong trembling, her blood seemed to congeal briefly, and she resisted a wave of hysteria.

She looked about her for the man she expected to see. Nothing met her eyes but the ring of tall, thickly-leafed forest giants, and the blue slopes beyond them. Had the Freebooter's slayer dragged himself away, mortally wounded? No bloody tracks led away from the body.

Puzzled, she swept the surrounding trees, stiffening as she caught a rustle in the emerald leaves that seemed not to be of the wind. She went toward the trees, staring into the leafy depths.

"Conan?" Her call was inquiring; her voice sounded strange and small in the vastness of silence that had grown suddenly tense.

Her knees began to tremble as a nameless panic swept over her.

"Conan!" she cried desperately. "It is I – Sancha! Where are you? Please, Conan –" Her voice faltered away. Unbelieving horror dilated her brown eyes. Her red lips parted to an inarticulate scream. Paralysis gripped her limbs; where she had such desperate need of swift flight, she could not move. She could only shriek wordlessly.

II

When Conan saw Zaporavo stalk alone into the woodland, he felt that the chance he had watched for had come. He had eaten no fruit, nor joined in the horse-play of his mates; all his faculties were occupied with watching the buccaneer chief. Accustomed to Zaporavo's moods, his men were not particularly surprized that their captain should choose to explore an unknown

and probably hostile isle alone. They turned to their own amusement, and did not notice Conan when he glided like a stalking panther after the chieftain.

Conan did not underrate his dominance of the crew. But he had not gained the right, through battle and foray, to challenge the captain to a duel to the death. In these empty seas there had been no opportunity for him to prove himself according to Freebooter law. The crew would stand solidly against him if he attacked the chieftain openly. But he knew that if he killed Zaporavo without their knowledge, the leaderless crew would not be likely to be swayed by loyalty to a dead man. In such wolf-packs only the living counted.

So he followed Zaporavo with sword in hand and eagerness in his heart, until he came out onto a level summit, circled with tall trees, between whose trunks he saw the green vistas of the slopes melting into the blue distance. In the midst of the glade Zaporavo, sensing pursuit, turned, hand on hilt.

The buccaneer swore.

“Dog, why do you follow me?”

“Are you mad, to ask?” laughed Conan, coming swiftly toward his erstwhile chief. His lips smiled, and in his blue eyes danced a wild gleam.

Zaporavo ripped out his sword with a black curse, and steel clashed against steel as the Barachan came in recklessly and wide open, his blade singing a wheel of blue flame about his head.

Zaporavo was the veteran of a thousand fights by sea and by land. There was no man in the world more deeply and thoroughly versed than he in the lore of swordcraft. But he had never been pitted against a blade wielded by thews bred in the wild lands beyond the borders of civilization. Against his fighting-craft was matched blinding speed and strength impossible to a civilized man. Conan’s manner of fighting was unorthodox, but instinctive and natural as that of a timber wolf. The intricacies of the sword were as useless against his primitive fury as a human boxer’s skill against the onslaughts of a panther.

Fighting as he had never fought before, straining every last ounce of effort to parry the blade that flickered like lightning about his head, Zaporavo in desperation caught a full stroke near his hilt, and felt his whole arm go numb beneath the terrific impact. That stroke was instantly followed by a thrust with such terrible drive behind it that the sharp point ripped through chain-mail

and ribs like paper, to transfix the heart beneath. Zaporavo's lips writhed in brief agony, but, grim to the last, he made no sound. He was dead before his body relaxed on the trampled grass, where blood drops glittered like spilt rubies in the sun.

Conan shook the red drops from his sword, grinned with unaffected pleasure, stretched like a huge cat – and abruptly stiffened, the expression of satisfaction on his face being replaced by a stare of bewilderment. He stood like a statue, his sword trailing in his hand.

As he lifted his eyes from his vanquished foe, they had absently rested on the surrounding trees, and the vistas beyond. And he had seen a fantastic thing – a thing incredible and inexplicable. Over the soft rounded green shoulder of a distant slope had loped a tall black naked figure, bearing on its shoulder an equally naked white form. The apparition vanished as suddenly as it had appeared, leaving the watcher gasping in surprize.

The pirate stared about him, glanced uncertainly back the way he had come, and swore. He was nonplussed – a bit upset, if the term might be applied to one of such steely nerves as his. In the midst of realistic, if exotic surroundings, a vagrant image of fantasy and nightmare had been introduced. Conan doubted neither his eyesight nor his sanity. He had seen something alien and uncanny, he knew; the mere fact of a black figure racing across the landscape carrying a white captive was bizarre enough, but this black figure had been unnaturally tall.

Shaking his head doubtfully, Conan started off in the direction in which he had seen the thing.

He did not argue the wisdom of his move; with his curiosity so piqued, he had no choice but to follow its promptings.

Slope after slope he traversed, each with its even sward and clustered groves. The general trend was always upward, though he ascended and descended the gentle inclines with monotonous regularity. The array of rounded shoulders and shallow declivities was bewildering and apparently endless. But at last he advanced up what he believed was the highest summit on the island, and halted at the sight of green shining walls and towers, which, until he had reached the spot on which he then stood, had merged so perfectly with the

green landscape as to be invisible, even to his keen sight.

He hesitated, fingered his sword, then went forward, bitten by the worm of curiosity. He saw no one as he approached a tall archway in the curving wall. There was no door. Peering warily through, he saw what seemed to be a broad open court, grass-carpeted, surrounded by a circular wall of the green semi-translucent substance. Various arches opened from it. Advancing on the balls of his bare feet, sword ready, he chose one of these arches at random, and passed into another similar court. Over an inner wall he saw the pinnacles of strangely shaped tower-like structures. One of these towers was built in, or projected into the court in which he found himself, and a broad stair led up to it, along the side of the wall. Up this he went, wondering if it were all real, or if he were not in the midst of a black lotus dream.

At the head of the stair he found himself on a walled ledge, or balcony, he was not sure which.

He could now make out more details of the towers, but they were meaningless to him. He 247

realized uneasily that no ordinary human beings could have built them. There was symmetry about their architecture, and system, but it was a mad symmetry, a system alien to human sanity. As for the plan of the whole town, castle, or whatever it was intended for, he could see just enough to get the impression of a great number of courts, mostly circular, each surrounded by its own wall, and connected with the others by open arches, and all, apparently, grouped about the cluster of fantastic towers in the center.

Turning in the other direction from these towers, he got a fearful shock, and crouched down suddenly behind the parapet of the balcony, glaring amazedly.

The balcony or ledge was higher than the opposite wall, and he was looking over that wall into another swarded court. The inner curve of the further wall of that court differed from the others he had seen, in that, instead of being smooth, it seemed to be banded with long lines or ledges, crowded with small objects the nature of which he could not determine.

However, he gave little heed to the wall at the time. His attention was centered on the band of beings that squatted about a dark green pool in the midst of the court. These creatures were black and naked, made like men, but the least of them, standing upright, would have towered head and shoulders

above the tall pirate. They were rangy rather than massive, but were finely formed, with no suggestion of deformity or abnormality, save as their great height was abnormal. But even at that distance Conan sensed the basic diabolism of their features.

In their midst, cringing and naked, stood a youth that Conan recognized as the youngest sailor aboard the *Wastrel*. He, then, had been the captive the pirate had seen borne across the grass-covered slope. Conan had heard no sound of fighting – saw no blood-stains or wounds on the sleek ebon limbs of the giants. Evidently the lad had wandered inland away from his companions and been snatched up by a black man lurking in ambush. Conan mentally termed the creatures black men, for lack of a better term; instinctively he knew these tall ebony beings were not men, as he understood the term.

No sound came to him. The blacks nodded and gestured to one another, but they did not seem to speak – vocally, at least. One, squatting on his haunches before the cringing boy, held a pipe-like thing in his hand. This he set to his lips, and apparently blew, though Conan heard no sound. But the Zingaran youth heard or felt, and cringed. He quivered and writhed as if in agony; a regularity became evident in the twitching of his limbs, which quickly became rhythmic. The twitching became a violent jerking, the jerking regular movements. The youth began to dance, as cobras dance by compulsion to the tune of the faquir's fife. There was naught of zest or joyful abandon in that dance. There was, indeed, abandon that was awful to see, but it was not joyful. It was as if the mute tune of the pipes grasped the boy's inmost soul with salacious fingers and with brutal torture wrung from it every involuntary expression of secret passion. It was a convulsion of obscenity, a spasm of lasciviousness – an exudation of secret hungers framed by compulsion: desire without pleasure, pain mated awfully to lust. It 248

was like watching a soul stripped naked, and all its dark and unmentionable secrets laid bare.

Conan glared, frozen with repulsion and shaken with nausea. Himself as cleanly elemental as a timber wolf, he was yet not ignorant of the perverse secrets of rotting civilizations. He had roamed the cities of Zamora, and known the women of Shadizar the Wicked. But he sensed here a cosmic vileness transcending mere human degeneracy – a perverse branch on the tree of Life, developed along lines outside human comprehension. It was not at the agonized contortions and posturing of the wretched boy that he was shocked,

but at the cosmic obscenity of these beings which could drag to light the abysmal secrets that sleep in the unfathomed darkness of the human soul, and find pleasure in the brazen flaunting of such things as should not be hinted at, even in restless nightmares.

Suddenly the black torturer laid down the pipes and rose, towering over the writhing white figure. Brutally grasping the boy by neck and haunch, the giant up-ended him and thrust him head-first into the green pool. Conan saw the white glimmer of his naked body amid the green water, as the black giant held his captive deep under the surface. Then there was a restless movement among the other blacks, and Conan ducked quickly below the balcony wall, not daring to raise his head lest he be seen.

After a while his curiosity got the better of him, and he cautiously peered out again. The blacks were filing out of an archway into another court. One of them was just placing something on a ledge of the further wall, and Conan saw it was the one who had tortured the boy. He was taller than the others, and wore a jeweled head-band. Of the Zingaran boy there was no trace. The giant followed his fellows, and presently Conan saw them emerge from the archway by which he had gained access to that castle of horror, and file away across the green slopes, in the direction from which he had come. They bore no arms, yet he felt that they planned further aggression against the Freebooters.

But before he went to warn the unsuspecting buccaneers, he wished to investigate the fate of the boy. No sound disturbed the quiet. The pirate believed that the towers and courts were deserted save for himself.

He went swiftly down the stair, crossed the court and passed through an arch into the court the blacks had just quitted. Now he saw the nature of the striated wall. It was banded by narrow ledges, apparently cut out of the solid stone, and ranged along these ledges or shelves were thousands of tiny figures, mostly grayish in color. These figures, not much longer than a man’s hand, represented men, and so cleverly were they made that Conan recognized various racial characteristics in the different idols, features typical of Zingarans, Argoseans, Ophireans, and Kushite corsairs. These last were black in color, just as their models were black in reality.

Conan was aware of a vague uneasiness as he stared at the dumb sightless figures. There was a 249

mimicry of reality about them that was somehow disturbing. He felt of them gingerly and could not decide of what material they were made. It felt like petrified bone; but he could not imagine petrified substance being found in the locality in such abundance as to be used so lavishly.

He noticed that the images representing types with which he was familiar were all on the higher ledges. The lower ledges were occupied by figures the features of which were strange to him. They either embodied merely the artists' imagination, or typified racial types long vanished and forgotten.

Shaking his head impatiently, Conan turned toward the pool. The circular court offered no place of concealment; as the body of the boy was nowhere in sight, it must be lying at the bottom of the pool.

Approaching the placid green disk, he stared into the glimmering surface. It was like looking through a thick green glass, unclouded, yet strangely illusory. Of no great dimensions, the pool was round as a well, bordered by a rim of green jade. Looking down he could see the rounded bottom – how far below the surface he could not decide. But the pool seemed incredibly deep –

he was aware of a dizziness as he looked down, much as if he were looking into an abyss. He was puzzled by his ability to see the bottom; but it lay beneath his gaze, impossibly remote, illusive, shadowy, yet visible. At times he thought a faint luminosity was apparent deep in the jade-colored depth, but he could not be sure. Yet he was sure that the pool was empty except for the shimmering water.

Then where in the name of Crom was the boy whom he had seen brutally drowned in that pool? Rising, Conan fingered his sword, and gazed around the court again. His gaze focussed on a spot on one of the higher ledges. There he had seen the tall black place something – cold sweat broke suddenly out on Conan's brown hide.

Hesitantly, yet as if drawn by a magnet, the pirate approached the shimmering wall. Dazed by a suspicion too monstrous to voice, he glared up at the last figure on that ledge. A horrible familiarity made itself evident. Stony, immobile, dwarfish, yet unmistakable, the features of the Zingaran boy stared unseeingly at him. Conan recoiled, shaken to his soul's foundations. His sword trailed in his paralyzed hand as he glared, open-mouthed, stunned by the realization which was too abysmal and awful for the mind to grasp.

Yet the fact was indisputable; the secret of the dwarfish images was revealed, though behind that secret lay the darker and more cryptic secret of their being.

III

How long Conan stood drowned in dizzy cogitation, he never knew. A voice shook him out of 250

his gaze, a feminine voice that shrieked more and more loudly, as if the owner of the voice were being borne nearer. Conan recognized that voice, and his paralysis vanished instantly.

A quick bound carried him high up on the narrow ledges, where he clung, kicking aside the clustering images to obtain room for his feet. Another spring and a scramble, and he was clinging to the rim of the wall, glaring over it. It was an outer wall; he was looking into the green meadow that surrounded the castle.

Across the grassy level a giant black was striding, carrying a squirming captive under one arm as a man might carry a rebellious child. It was Sancha, her black hair falling in disheveled rippling waves, her olive skin contrasting abruptly with the glossy ebony of her captor. He gave no heed to her wrigglings and cries as he made for the outer archway.

As he vanished within, Conan sprang recklessly down the wall and glided into the arch that opened into the further court. Crouching there, he saw the giant enter the court of the pool, carrying his writhing captive. Now he was able to make out the creature’s details.

The superb symmetry of body and limbs was more impressive at close range. Under the ebon skin long, rounded muscles rippled, and Conan did not doubt that the monster could rend an ordinary man limb from limb. The nails of the fingers provided further weapons, for they were grown like the talons of a wild beast. The face was a carven ebony mask. The eyes were tawny, a vibrant gold that glowed and glittered. But the face was inhuman; each line, each feature was stamped with evil – evil transcending the mere evil of humanity. The thing was not a human –

it could not be; it was a growth of Life from the pits of blasphemous creation – a perversion of evolutionary development.

The giant cast Sancha down on the sward, where she grovelled, crying with pain and terror. He cast a glance about as if uncertain, and his tawny eyes narrowed as they rested on the images overturned and knocked from the wall.

Then he stooped, grasped his captive by her neck and crotch, and strode purposefully toward the green pool. And Conan glided from his archway, and raced like a wind of death across the sward.

The giant wheeled, and his eyes flared as he saw the bronzed avenger rushing toward him. In the instant of surprize his cruel grip relaxed and Sancha wriggled from his hands and fell to the grass. The taloned hands spread and clutched, but Conan ducked beneath their swoop and drove his sword through the giant's groin. The black went down like a felled tree, gushing blood, and the next instant Conan was seized in a frantic grasp as Sancha sprang up and threw her arms around him in a frenzy of terror and hysterical relief.

He cursed as he disengaged himself, but his foe was already dead; the tawny eyes were glazed, the long ebony limbs had ceased to twitch.

"Oh, Conan," Sancha was sobbing, clinging tenaciously to him, "what will become of us?

What are these monsters? Oh, surely this is hell and that was the devil –"

"Then hell needs a new devil," the Barachan grinned fiercely. "But how did he get hold of you?

Have they taken the ship?"

"I don't know." She tried to wipe away her tears, fumbled for her skirt, and then remembered that she wore none. "I came ashore. I saw you follow Zaporavo, and I followed you both. I found Zaporavo – was – was it you who –"

"Who else?" he grunted. "What then?"

"I saw a movement in the trees," she shuddered. "I thought it was you. I called – then I saw that

– that black *thing* squatting like an ape among the branches, leering down at me. It was like a nightmare; I couldn't run. All I could do was squeal. Then it dropped from the tree and seized me – oh, oh, oh!" She hid her face in her hands, and was shaken anew at the memory of the horror.

“Well, we’ve got to get out of here,” he growled, catching her wrist. “Come on; we’ve got to get to the crew –”

“Most of them were asleep on the beach as I entered the woods,” she said.

“Asleep?” he exclaimed profanely. “What in the seven devils of hell’s fire and damnation –”

“Listen!” She froze, a white quivering image of fright.

“I heard it!” he snapped. “A moaning cry! Wait!”

He bounded up the ledges again, and glaring over the wall, swore with a concentrated fury that made even Sancha gasp. The black men were returning, but they came not alone or empty-handed. Each bore a limp human form; some bore two. Their captives were the Freebooters; they hung slackly in their captors’ arms, and but for an occasional vague movement or twitching, Conan would have believed them dead. They had been disarmed but not stripped; one of the blacks bore their sheathed swords, a great arm-load of bristling steel. From time to time one of the seamen voiced a vague cry, like a drunkard calling out in sottish sleep.

Like a trapped wolf Conan glared about him. Three arches led out of the court of the pool.

Through the eastern arch the blacks had left the court, and through it they would presumably return. He had entered by the southern arch. In the western arch he had hidden, and had not had time to notice what lay beyond it. Regardless of his ignorance of the plan of the castle, he was 252

forced to make his decision promptly.

Springing down the wall, he replaced the images with frantic haste, dragged the corpse of his victim to the pool and cast it in. It sank instantly, and as he looked, he distinctly saw an appalling contraction – a shrinking, a hardening. He hastily turned away, shuddering. Then he seized his companion’s arm and led her hastily toward the southern archway, while she begged to be told what was happening.

“They’ve bagged the crew,” he answered hastily. “I haven’t any plan, but we’ll hide somewhere and watch. If they don’t look in the pool, they may not

suspect our presence."

"But they'll see the blood on the grass!"

"Maybe they'll think one of their own devils spilled it," he answered. "Anyway, we'll have to take the chance."

They were in the court from which he had watched the torture of the boy, and he led her hastily up the stair that mounted the southern wall, and forced her into a crouching position behind the balustrade of the balcony; it was poor concealment, but the best they could do.

Scarcely had they settled themselves, when the blacks filed into the court. There was a resounding clash at the foot of the stairs, and Conan stiffened, grasping his sword. But the blacks passed through an archway on the southwestern side, and they heard a series of thuds and groans. The giants were casting their victims down on the sward. An hysterical giggle rose to Sancha's lips, and Conan quickly clapped his hand over her mouth, stifling the sound before it could betray them.

After awhile they heard the padding of many feet on the sward below, and then silence reigned.

Conan peered over the wall. The court was empty. The blacks were once more gathered about the pool in the adjoining court, squatting on their haunches. They seemed to pay no heed to the great smears of blood on the sward and the jade rim of the pool. Evidently blood stains were nothing unusual. Nor were they looking into the pool. They were engrossed in some inexplicable conclave of their own; the tall black was playing again on his golden pipes, and his companions listened like ebony statues.

Taking Sancha's hand, Conan glided down the stair, stooping so that his head would not be visible above the wall. The cringing girl followed perforce, staring fearfully at the arch that let into the court of the pool, but through which, at that angle, neither the pool nor its grim throng was visible. At the foot of the stair lay the swords of the Zingarans. The clash they had heard 253

had been the casting down of the captured weapons.

Conan drew Sancha toward the southwestern arch, and they silently crossed the sward and entered the court beyond. There the Freebooters lay in careless

heaps, mustaches bristling, earrings glinting. Here and there one stirred or groaned restlessly. Conan bent down to them, and Sancha knelt beside him, leaning forward with her hands on her thighs.

“What is that sweet cloying smell?” she asked nervously. “It’s on all their breaths.”

“It’s that damned fruit they were eating,” he answered softly. “I remember the smell of it. It must have been like the black lotus, that makes men sleep. By Crom, they are beginning to awake – but they’re unarmed, and I have an idea that those black devils won’t wait long before they begin their magic on them. What chance will the lads have, unarmed and stupid with slumber?”

He brooded for an instant, scowling with the intentness of his thoughts; then he seized Sancha’s olive shoulder in a grip that made her wince.

“Listen! I’ll draw those black swine into another part of the castle and keep them busy for awhile. Meanwhile you shake these fools awake, and bring their swords to them – it’s a fighting chance. Can you do it?”

“I – I – don’t know!” she stammered, shaking with terror, and hardly knowing what she was saying.

With a curse Conan caught her thick tresses near her head and shook her until the walls danced to her dizzy sight.

“You *must* do it!” he hissed. “It’s our only chance!”

“I’ll do my best!” she gasped, and with a grunt of commendation and an encouraging slap on the back that nearly knocked her down, he glided away.

A few moments later he was crouching at the arch that opened into the court of the pool, glaring upon his enemies. They still sat about the pool, but were beginning to show evidences of an evil impatience. From the court where lay the rousing buccaneers he heard their groans growing louder, beginning to be mingled with incoherent curses. He tensed his muscles and sank into a pantherish crouch, breathing easily between his teeth.

The jeweled giant rose, taking his pipes from his lips – and at that instant Conan was among the startled blacks with a tigerish bound. And as a tiger leaps and strikes among his prey, 254

Conan leaped and struck: thrice his blade flickered before any could lift a hand in defense; then he bounded from among them and raced across the sward. Behind him sprawled three black figures, their skulls split.

But though the unexpected fury of his surprize had caught the giants off guard, the survivors recovered quickly enough. They were at his heels as he ran through the western arch, their long legs sweeping them over the ground at headlong speed. However, he felt confident of his ability to outfoot them at will; but that was not his purpose. He intended leading them on a long chase, in order to give Sancha time to rouse and arm the Zingarans.

And as he raced into the court beyond the western arch, he swore. This court differed from the others he had seen. Instead of round, it was octagonal, and the arch by which he had entered was the only entrance or exit.

Wheeling, he saw that the entire band had followed him in; a group clustered in the arch, and the rest spread out in a wide line as they approached. He faced them, backing slowly toward the northern wall. The line bent into a semicircle, spreading out to hem him in. He continued to move backward, but more and more slowly, noting the spaces widening between the pursuers.

They feared lest he should try to dart around a horn of the crescent, and lengthened their line to prevent it.

He watched with the calm alertness of a wolf, and when he struck it was with the devastating suddenness of a thunderbolt – full at the center of the crescent. The giant who barred his way went down cloven to the middle of the breast-bone, and the pirate was outside their closing ring before the blacks to right and left could come to their stricken comrade’s aid. The group at the gate prepared to receive his onslaught, but Conan did not charge them. He had turned and was watching his hunters without apparent emotion, and certainly without fear.

This time they did not spread out in a thin line. They had learned that it was fatal to divide their forces against such an incarnation of clawing, rending fury. They bunched up in a compact mass, and advanced on him without undue haste, maintaining their formation.

Conan knew that if he fell foul of that mass of taloned muscle and bone, there could be but one culmination. Once he let them drag him down among them where they could reach him with their talons and use their greater body-weight to advantage, even his primitive ferocity would not prevail. He glanced around the wall and saw a ledge-like projection above a corner on the

western side. What it was he did not know, but it would serve his purpose. He began backing toward that corner, and the giants advanced more rapidly. They evidently thought that they were herding him into the corner themselves, and Conan found time to reflect that they probably looked on him as a member of a lower order, mentally inferior to themselves. So 255

much the better. Nothing is more disastrous than underrating one’s antagonist.

Now he was only a few yards from the wall, and the blacks were closing in rapidly, evidently thinking to pin him in the corner before he realized his situation. The group at the gate had deserted their post and were hastening to join their fellows. The giants half crouched, eyes blazing like golden hell-fire, teeth glistening whitely, taloned hands lifted as if to fend off attack. They expected an abrupt and violent move on the part of their prey, but when it came, it took them by surprize.

Conan lifted his sword, took a step toward them, then wheeled and raced to the wall. With a fleeting coil and release of steel muscles, he shot high in the air, and his straining arm hooked its fingers over the projection. Instantly there was a rending crash and the jutting ledge gave way, precipitating the pirate back into the court.

He hit on his back, which for all its springy sinews would have broken but for the cushioning of the sward, and rebounding like a great cat, he faced his foes. The dancing recklessness was gone from his eyes. They blazed like blue bale-fire; his mane bristled, his thin lips snarled. In an instant the affair had changed from a daring game to a battle of life and death, and Conan’s savage nature responded with all the fury of the wild.

The blacks, halted an instant by the swiftness of the episode, now made to sweep on him and drag him down. But in that instant a shout broke the stillness. Wheeling, the giants saw a disreputable throng crowding the arch. The buccaneers weaved drunkenly, they swore incoherently; they were addled and bewildered, but they grasped their swords and advanced with a ferocity not dimmed in the slightest by the fact that they did not understand what it was all about.

As the blacks glared in amazement, Conan yelled stridently and struck them like a razor-edged thunderbolt. They fell like ripe grain beneath his blade, and the Zingarans, shouting with muddled fury, ran groggily across the court and fell on their gigantic foes with bloodthirsty zeal. They were still dazed;

emerging hazily from drugged slumber, they had felt Sancha frantically shaking them and shoving swords into their fists, and had vaguely heard her urging them to some sort of action. They had not understood all she said, but the sight of strangers, and blood streaming, was enough for them.

In an instant the court was turned into a battle-ground which soon resembled a slaughter-house.

The Zingarans weaved and rocked on their feet, but they wielded their swords with power and effect, swearing prodigiously, and quite oblivious to all wounds except those instantly fatal.

They far outnumbered the blacks, but these proved themselves no mean antagonists. Towering above their assailants, the giants wrought havoc with talons and teeth, tearing out men’s throats, and dealing blows with clenched fists that crushed in skulls. Mixed and mingled in that mêlée, the buccaneers could not use their superior agility to the best advantage, and many were 256

too stupid from their drugged sleep to avoid blows aimed at them. They fought with a blind wild-beast ferocity, too intent on dealing death to evade it. The sound of the hacking swords was like that of butchers' cleavers, and the shrieks, yells and curses were appalling.

Sancha, shrinking in the archway, was stunned by the noise and fury; she got a dazed impression of a whirling chaos in which steel flashed and hacked, arms tossed, snarling faces appeared and vanished, and straining bodies collided, rebounded, locked and mingled in a devil's dance of madness.

Details stood out briefly, like black etchings on a background of blood. She saw a Zingaran sailor, blinded by a great flap of scalp torn loose and hanging over his eyes, brace his straddling legs and drive his sword to the hilt in a black belly. She distinctly heard the buccaneer grunt as he struck, and saw the victim's tawny eyes roll up in sudden agony; blood and entrails gushed out over the driven blade. The dying black caught the blade with his naked hands, and the sailor tugged blindly and stupidly; then a black arm hooked about the Zingaran's head, a black knee was planted with cruel force in the middle of his back. His head was jerked back at a terrible angle, and something cracked above the noise of the fray, like the breaking of a thick branch. The conqueror dashed his victim's body to the earth—and as he did, something like a beam of blue light flashed across his shoulders from behind, from right to left. He staggered, his head toppled forward on his breast, and thence, hideously, to the earth.

Sancha turned sick. She gagged and wished to vomit. She made abortive efforts to turn and flee from the spectacle, but her legs would not work. Nor could she close her eyes. In fact, she opened them wider. Revolted, repelled, nauseated, yet she felt the awful fascination she had always experienced at sight of blood. Yet this battle transcended anything she had ever seen fought out between human beings in port raids or sea battles. Then she saw Conan.

Separated from his mates by the whole mass of the enemy, Conan had been enveloped in a black wave of arms and bodies, and dragged down. Then they would quickly have stamped the life out of him, but he had pulled down one of them with him, and the black's body protected that of the pirate beneath him. They kicked and tore at the Barachan and dragged at their writhing comrade, but Conan's teeth were set desperately in his throat, and the pirate clung tenaciously to his dying shield.

An onslaught of Zingarans caused a slackening of the press, and Conan threw aside the corpse and rose, blood-smeared and terrible. The giants towered

above him like great black shadows, clutching, buffeting the air with terrible blows. But he was as hard to hit or grapple as a blood-mad panther, and at every turn or flash of his blade, blood jetted. He had already taken punishment enough to kill three ordinary men, but his bull-like vitality was undiminished.

His war-cry rose above the medley of the carnage, and the bewildered but furious Zingarans took fresh heart and redoubled their strokes, until the rending of flesh and the crunching of bone beneath the swords almost drowned the howls of pain and wrath.

The blacks wavered, and broke for the gate, and Sancha squealed at their coming and scurried out of the way. They jammed in the narrow archway, and the Zingarans stabbed and hacked at their straining backs with strident yelps of glee. The gate was a shambles before the survivors broke through and scattered, each for himself.

The battle became a chase. Across grassy courts, up shimmering stairs, over the slanting roofs of fantastic towers, even along the broad coping of the walls, the giants fled, dripping blood at each step, harried by their merciless pursuers as by wolves. Cornered, some of them turned at bay and men died. But the ultimate result was always the same – a mangled black body twitching on the sward, or hurled writhing and twisting from parapet or tower roof.

Sancha had taken refuge in the court of the pool, where she crouched, shaking with terror.

Outside rose a fierce yelling, feet pounded the sward, and through the arch burst a black red-stained figure. It was the giant who wore the gemmed head-band. A squat pursuer was close behind, and the black turned, at the very brink of the pool. In his extremity he had picked up a sword dropped by a dying sailor, and as the Zingaran rushed recklessly at him, he struck with the unfamiliar weapon. The buccaneer dropped with his skull crushed, but so awkwardly the blow was dealt, the blade shivered in the giant’s hand.

He hurled the hilt at the figures which thronged the arch, and bounded toward the pool, his face a convulsed mask of hate. Conan burst through the men at the gate, and his feet spurned the sward in his headlong charge.

But the giant threw his great arms wide and from his lips rang an inhuman cry – the only sound made by a black during the entire fight. It screamed to the sky its awful hate; it was like a voice howling from the pits. At the sound the Zingarans faltered and hesitated. But Conan did not pause. Silently and murderously he drove at the ebon figure poised on the brink of the pool.

But even as his dripping sword gleamed in the air, the black wheeled and bounded high. For a flash of an instant they saw him poised in midair above the pool; then with an earth-shaking roar, the green waters rose and rushed up to meet him, enveloping him in a green volcano.

Conan checked his headlong rush just in time to keep from toppling into the pool, and he sprang back, thrusting his men behind him with mighty swings of his arms. The green pool was like a geyser now, the noise rising to deafening volume as the great column of water reared and 258

reared, blossoming at the crest with a great crown of foam.

Conan was driving his men to the gate, herding them ahead of him, beating them with the flat of his sword; the roar of the water-spout seemed to have robbed them of their faculties. Seeing Sancha standing paralyzed, staring with wide-eyed terror at the seething pillar, he accosted her with a bellow that cut through the thunder of the water and made her jump out of her daze. She ran to him, arms outstretched, and he caught her up under one arm and raced out of the court.

In the court which opened on the outer world, the survivors had gathered, weary, tattered, wounded and blood-stained, and stood gaping dumbly at the great unstable pillar that towered momentarily nearer the blue vault of the sky. Its green trunk was laced with white; its foaming crown was thrice the circumference of its base. Momentarily it threatened to burst and fall in an engulfing torrent, yet it continued to jet skyward.

Conan’s eyes swept the bloody, naked group, and he cursed to see only a score. In the stress of the moment he grasped a corsair by the neck and shook him so violently that blood from the man’s wounds spattered all near them.

“Where are the rest?” he bellowed in his victim’s ear.

“That’s all!” the other yelled back, above the roar of the geyser. “The others were all killed by those black –”

“Well, get out of here!” roared Conan, giving him a thrust that sent him staggering headlong toward the outer archway. “That fountain is going to burst in a moment –”

“We’ll all be drowned!” squawked a Freebooter, limping toward the arch.

“Drowned, hell!” yelled Conan. “We’ll be turned to pieces of petrified bone! Get out, blast you!”

He ran to the outer archway, one eye on the green roaring tower that loomed so awfully above him, the other on stragglers. Dazed with blood-lust, fighting, and the thunderous noise, some of the Zingarans moved like men in a trance. Conan hurried them up; his method was simple. He grasped loiterers by the scruff of the neck, impelled them violently through the gate, added impetus with a lusty kick in the rear, spicing his urgings for haste with pungent comments on the victim’s ancestry. Sancha showed an inclination to remain with him, but he jerked away her twining arms, blaspheming luridly, and accelerated her movements with a tremendous slap on the posterior that sent her scurrying across the plateau.

Conan did not leave the gate until he was sure all his men who yet lived were out of the castle 259

and started across the level meadow. Then he glanced again at the roaring pillar looming against the sky, dwarfing the towers, and he too fled that castle of nameless horrors.

The Zingarans had already crossed the rim of the plateau and were fleeing down the slopes.

Sancha waited for him at the crest of the first slope beyond the rim, and there he paused for an instant to look back at the castle. It was as if a gigantic green-stemmed and white-blossomed flower swayed above the towers, the roar filled the sky. Then the jade-green and snowy pillar broke with a noise like the rending of the skies, and walls and towers were blotted out in a thunderous torrent.

Conan caught the girl’s hand, and fled. Slope after slope rose and fell before them, and behind sounded the rushing of a river. A glance over his straining shoulder showed a broad green ribbon rising and falling as it swept over the slopes. The torrent had not spread out and dissipated; like a giant serpent it

flowed over the depressions and the rounded crests. It held a consistent course – *it was following them.*

The realization roused Conan to a greater pitch of endurance. Sancha stumbled and went to her knees with a moaning cry of despair and exhaustion. Catching her up, Conan tossed her over his giant shoulder and ran on. His breast heaved, his knees trembled; his breath tore in great gasps through his teeth. He reeled in his gait. Ahead of him he saw the sailors toiling, spurred on by the terror that gripped him.

The ocean burst suddenly on his view, and in his swimming gaze floated the *Wastrel*, unharmed. Men tumbled into the boats helter-skelter. Sancha fell into the bottom and lay there in a crumpled heap. Conan, though the blood thundered in his ears and the world swam red to his gaze, took an oar with the panting sailors.

With hearts ready to burst from exhaustion, they pulled for the ship. The green river burst through the fringe of trees. Those trees fell as if their stems had been cut away, and as they sank into the jade-colored flood, they vanished. The tide flowed out over the beach, lapped at the ocean, and the waves turned a deeper, more sinister green.

Unreasoning, instinctive fear held the buccaneers, making them urge their agonized bodies and reeling brains to greater effort; what they feared they knew not, but they did know that in that abominable smooth green ribbon was a menace to body and to soul. Conan knew, and as he saw the broad line slip into the waves and stream through the water toward them, without altering its shape or course, he called up his last ounce of reserve strength so fiercely that the oar snapped in his hands.

But their prows bumped against the timbers of the *Wastrel*, and the sailors staggered up the chains, leaving the boats to drift as they would. Sancha went up on Conan’s broad shoulder, hanging limp as a corpse, to be dumped unceremoniously on to the deck as the Barachan took the wheel, gasping orders to his skeleton of a crew. Throughout the affair, he had taken the lead without question, and they had instinctively followed him. They reeled about like drunken men, fumbling mechanically at ropes and braces. The anchor chain, unshackled, splashed into the water, the sails unfurled and bellied in a rising wind. The *Wastrel* quivered and shook herself, and swung majestically

seaward. Conan glared shoreward; like a tongue of emerald flame, a ribbon licked out on the water futilely, an oar's length from the *Wastrel* 's keel. It advanced no further. From that end of the tongue, his gaze followed an unbroken stream of lambent green across the white beach, and over the slopes, until it faded in the blue distance.

The Barachan, regaining his wind, grinned at the panting crew. Sancha was standing near him, hysterical tears coursing down her cheeks. Conan's breeks hung in blood-stained tatters; his girdle and sheath were gone, his sword, driven upright into the deck beside him, was notched and crusted with red. Blood thickly clotted his black mane, and one ear had been half torn from his head. His arms, legs, breast and shoulders were bitten and clawed as if by panthers. But he grinned as he braced his powerful legs, and swung on the wheel in sheer exuberance of muscular might.

"What now?" faltered the girl.

"The plunder of the seas!" he laughed. "A paltry crew, and that chewed and clawed to pieces, but they can work the ship, and crews can always be found. Come here, girl, and give me a kiss."

"A kiss?" she cried hysterically. "You think of kisses at a time like this?"

His laughter boomed above the snap and thunder of the sails, as he caught her up off her feet in the crook of one mighty arm, and smacked her red lips with resounding relish.

"I think of Life!" he roared. "The dead are dead, and what has passed is done! I have a ship and a fighting crew and a girl with lips like wine, and that's all I ever asked. Lick your wounds, bullies, and break out a cask of ale. You're going to work ship as she never was worked before.

Dance and sing while you buckle to it, damn you! To the devil with empty seas! We're bound for waters where the seaports are fat, and the merchant ships are crammed with plunder!"

Rogues in the House

“One fled, one dead, one sleeping in a golden bed.”

– Old Rime.

At a court festival, Nabonidus, the Red Priest, who was the real ruler of the city, touched Murilo, the young aristocrat, courteously on the arm. Murilo turned to meet the priest’s enigmatic gaze, and to wonder at the hidden meaning therein. No words passed between them, but Nabonidus bowed and handed Murilo a small gold cask. The young nobleman, knowing that Nabonidus did nothing without reason, excused himself at the first opportunity and returned hastily to his chamber. There he opened the cask and found within a human ear, which he recognized by a peculiar scar upon it. He broke into a profuse sweat, and was no longer in doubt about the meaning in the Red Priest’s glance.

But Murilo, for all his scented black curls and foppish apparel, was no weakling to bend his neck to the knife without a struggle. He did not know whether Nabonidus was merely playing with him, or giving him a chance to go into voluntary exile, but the fact that he was still alive and at liberty proved that he was to be given at least a few hours, probably for meditation. But he needed no meditation for decision; what he needed was a tool. And Fate furnished that tool, working among the dives and brothels of the squalid quarters even while the young nobleman shivered and pondered in the part of the city occupied by the purple-towered marble and ivory palaces of the aristocracy.

There was a priest of Anu whose temple, rising at the fringe of the slums district, was the scene of more than devotions. The priest was fat and full-fed, and he was at once a fence for stolen articles and a spy for the police. He worked a thriving trade both ways, because the district on which he bordered was The Maze, a tangle of muddy winding alleys and sordid dens, frequented by the boldest thieves in the kingdom. Daring above all were a Gunderman deserter from the mercenaries and a barbaric Cimmerian. Because of the priest of Anu, the Gunderman was taken and hanged in the market-square. But the Cimmerian fled, and learning in devious ways of the priest’s treachery, he entered the temple of Anu by night, and cut off the priest’s head. There followed a great turmoil in the city, but search for the killer proved fruitless until his punk betrayed him to the authorities, and led a captain of the guard and his squad to the hidden chamber where the barbarian lay drunk.

Waking to stupefied but ferocious life when they seized him, he disemboweled the captain, burst through his assailants and would have escaped, but for the liquor that still clouded his senses. Bewildered and half blinded, he missed the open door in his headlong flight, and dashed his head against the stone wall so terrifically that he knocked himself senseless. When he came to, he was in the strongest dungeon in the city, shackled to the wall with chains not even his barbaric thews could break.

To this cell came Murilo, masked and wrapped in a wide black cloak. The Cimmerian surveyed him with interest, thinking him the executioner sent to dispatch him. Murilo set him at rights, and regarded him with no less interest. Even in the dim light of the dungeon, with his limbs loaded with chains, the primitive power of the man was evident. His mighty body and thick-muscled limbs combined the strength of a grizzly with the quickness of a panther. Under his tangled black mane his blue eyes blazed with unquenchable savagery.

“Would you like to live?” asked Murilo. The barbarian grunted, new interest glinting in his eyes.

“If I arrange for your escape will you do a favor for me?” the aristocrat asked.

The Cimmerian did not speak, but the intentness of his gaze answered for him.

“I want you to kill a man for me.”

“Whom?”

Murilo’s voice sank to a whisper. “Nabonidus, the king’s priest!”

The Cimmerian showed no sign of surprize or perturbation. He had none of the fear or reverence for authority that civilization instills in men. King or beggar, it was all one to him.

Nor did he ask why Murilo had come to him, when the quarters were full of cutthroats outside prisons.

“When am I to escape?” he demanded.

“Within the hour. There is but one guard in this part of the dungeon at night. He can be bribed; he *has* been bribed. See, here are the keys to your chains.

I'll remove them, and after I have been gone an hour, the guard, Athicus, will unlock the door to your cell. You will bind him with strips torn from your tunic; so when he is found, the authorities will think you were rescued from the outside, and will not suspect him. Go at once to the house of the Red Priest, and kill him. Then go to the Rats' Den, where a man will meet you and give you a pouch of gold and a horse. With those you can escape from the city and flee the country."

"Take off these cursed chains now," demanded the Cimmerian. "And have the guard bring me food. By Crom, I have lived on moldy bread and water for a whole day and I am nigh to famishing."

"It shall be done; but remember – you are not to escape until I have had time to reach my house."

Freed of his chains, the barbarian stood up and stretched his heavy arms, enormous in the gloom of the dungeon. Murilo again felt that if any man in the world could accomplish the task he had set, this Cimmerian could. With a few repeated instructions he left the prison, first directing Athicus to take a platter of beef and ale in to the prisoner. He knew he could trust the guard, not only because of the money he had paid, but also because of certain information he possessed regarding the man.

When he returned to his chamber, Murilo was in full control of his fears. Nabonidus would strike through the king – of that he was certain. And since the royal guardsmen were not knocking at his door, it was as certain that the priest had said nothing to the king, so far.

Tomorrow he would speak, beyond a doubt – if he lived to see tomorrow.

Murilo believed the Cimmerian would keep faith with him. Whether the man would be able to carry out his purpose remained to be seen. Men had attempted to assassinate the Red Priest before, and they had died in hideous and nameless ways. But they had been products of the cities of men, lacking the wolfish instincts of the barbarian. The instant that Murilo, turning the gold cask with its severed ear in his hands, had learned through his secret channels that the Cimmerian had been captured, he had seen a solution of his problem.

In his chamber again, he drank a toast to the man, whose name was Conan,

and to his success that night. And while he was drinking, one of his spies brought him the news that Athicus had been arrested and thrown into prison. The Cimmerian had not escaped.

Murilo felt his blood turn to ice again. He could see in this twist of fate only the sinister hand of Nabonidus, and an eery obsession began to grow on him that the Red Priest was more than human – a sorcerer who read the minds of his victims and pulled strings on which they danced like puppets. With despair came desperation. Girding a sword beneath his black cloak, he left his house by a hidden way, and hurried through the deserted streets. It was just at midnight when he came to the house of Nabonidus, looming blackly among the walled gardens that separated it from the surrounding estates.

The wall was high but not impossible to negotiate. Nabonidus did not put his trust in mere 264

barriers of stone. It was what was inside the wall that was to be feared. What these things were Murilo did not know precisely. He knew there was at least a huge savage dog that roamed the gardens and had on occasion torn an intruder to pieces as a hound rends a rabbit. What else there might be he did not care to conjecture. Men who had been allowed to enter the house on brief, legitimate business, reported that Nabonidus dwelt among rich furnishings, yet simply, attended by a surprizingly small number of servants. Indeed, they mentioned only one as having been visible – a tall silent man called Joka. Some one else, presumably a slave, had been heard moving about in the recesses of the house, but this person no one had ever seen.

The greatest mystery of that mysterious house was Nabonidus himself, whose power of intrigue and grasp on international politics had made him the strongest man in the kingdom.

People, chancellor and king moved puppet-like on the strings he worked.

Murilo scaled the wall and dropped down into the gardens, which were expanses of shadow, darkened by clumps of shrubbery and waving foliage. No light shone in the windows of the house which loomed so blackly among the trees. The young nobleman stole stealthily yet swiftly through the shrubs. Momentarily he expected to hear the baying of the great dog, and to see its giant body hurtle through the shadows. He doubted the effectiveness of his sword against such an attack, but he did not hesitate. As well die beneath the fangs of a beast as the ax of the headsman.

He stumbled over something bulky and yielding. Bending close in the dim starlight, he made out a limp shape on the ground. It was the dog that guarded the gardens, and it was dead. Its neck was broken and it bore what seemed to be the marks of great fangs. Murilo felt that no human being had done this. The beast had met a monster more savage than itself. Murilo glared nervously at the cryptic masses of bush and shrub; then with a shrug of his shoulders, he approached the silent house.

The first door he tried proved to be unlocked. He entered warily, sword in hand, and found himself in a long shadowy hallway dimly illumined by a light that gleamed through the hangings at the other end. Complete silence hung over the whole house. Murilo glided along the hall and halted to peer through the hangings. He looked into a lighted room, over the windows of which velvet curtains were drawn so closely as to allow no beam to shine through.

The room was empty, in so far as human life was concerned, but it had a grisly occupant, nevertheless. In the midst of a wreckage of furniture and torn hangings that told of a fearful struggle, lay the body of a man. The form lay on its belly, but the head was twisted about so that the chin rested behind a shoulder. The features, contorted into an awful grin, seemed to leer at the horrified nobleman.

For the first time that night, Murilo's resolution wavered. He cast an uncertain glance back the way he had come. Then the memory of the headsman's block and ax steeled him, and he crossed the room, swerving to avoid the grinning horror sprawled in its midst. Though he had never seen the man before, he knew from former descriptions that it was Joka, Nabonidus'

saturnine servant.

He peered through a curtained door into a broad circular chamber, banded by a gallery halfway between the polished floor and the lofty ceiling. This chamber was furnished as if for a king. In the midst of it stood an ornate mahogany table, loaded with vessels of wine and rich viands. And Murilo stiffened. In a great chair whose broad back was toward him, he saw a figure whose habiliments were familiar. He glimpsed an arm in a red sleeve resting on the arm of the chair; the head, clad in the familiar scarlet hood of the gown, was bent forward as if in meditation. Just so had Murilo seen

Nabonidus sit a hundred times in the royal court.

Cursing the pounding of his own heart, the young nobleman stole across the chamber, sword extended, his whole frame poised for the thrust. His prey did not move, nor seem to hear his cautious advance. Was the Red Priest asleep, or was it a corpse which slumped in that great chair? The length of a single stride separated Murilo from his enemy, when suddenly the man in the chair rose and faced him.

The blood went suddenly from Murilo's features. His sword fell from his fingers and rang on the polished floor. A terrible cry broke from his livid lips; it was followed by the thud of a falling body. Then once more silence reigned over the house of the Red Priest.

II

Shortly after Murilo left the dungeon where Conan the Cimmerian was confined, Athicus brought the prisoner a platter of food which included, among other things, a huge joint of beef and a tankard of ale. Conan fell to voraciously, and Athicus made a final round of the cells, to see that all was in order, and that none should witness the pretended prison-break. It was while he was so occupied that a squad of guardsmen marched into the prison and placed him under arrest. Murilo had been mistaken when he assumed this arrest denoted discovery of Conan's planned escape. It was another matter; Athicus had become careless in his dealings with the underworld, and one of his past sins had caught up with him.

Another jailer took his place, a stolid, dependable creature whom no amount of bribery could have shaken from his duty. He was unimaginative, but he had an exalted idea of the importance of his job.

After Athicus had been marched away to be formally arraigned before a magistrate, this jailer made the rounds of the cells as a matter of routine. As he passed that of Conan, his sense of propriety was shocked and outraged to see the prisoner free of his chains, and in the act of gnawing the last shreds of meat from a huge beef-bone. The jailer was so upset that he made the mistake of entering the cell alone, without calling guards from other parts of the prison. It was his first mistake in the line of duty, and his last. Conan brained him with the beef-bone, took his poniard and his keys, and made a leisurely departure. As Murilo had said, only one 266

guard was on duty there at night. The Cimmerian passed himself outside the walls by means of the keys he had taken, and presently emerged into the outer air, as free as if Murilo's plan had been successful.

In the shadows of the prison walls, Conan paused to decide his next course of action. It occurred to him that since he had escaped through his own actions, he owed nothing to Murilo; yet it had been the young nobleman who had removed his chains and had the food sent to him, without either of which his escape would have been impossible. Conan decided that he was indebted to Murilo, and, since he was a man who discharged his obligations eventually, he determined to carry out his promise to the young aristocrat. But first he had some business of his own to attend to.

He discarded his ragged tunic and moved off through the night naked but for a loin-cloth. As he went he fingered the poniard he had captured – a murderous weapon with a broad double-edged blade nineteen inches long. He slunk along alleys and shadowed plazas until he came to the district which was his destination – The Maze. Along its labyrinthine ways he went with the certainty of familiarity. It was indeed a maze of black alleys and enclosed courts and devious ways; of furtive sounds, and stenches. There was no paving on the streets; mud and filth mingled in an unsavory mess. Sewers were unknown; refuse was dumped into the alleys to form reeking heaps and puddles. Unless a man walked with care he was likely to lose his footing and plunge waist-deep into nauseous pools. Nor was it uncommon to stumble over a corpse lying with its throat cut or its head knocked in, in the mud. Honest folk shunned The Maze with good reason.

Conan reached his destination without being seen, just as one he wished fervently to meet was leaving it. As the Cimmerian slunk into the courtyard below, the girl who had sold him to the police was taking leave of her new lover in a chamber one flight up. This young thug, her door closed behind him, groped his way down a creaking flight of stairs, intent on his own meditations, which, like those of most of the denizens of The Maze, had to do with the unlawful acquirement of property. Part-way down the stairs, he halted suddenly, his hair standing up. A vague bulk crouched in the darkness before him, a pair of eyes blazed like the eyes of a hunting beast. A beast-like snarl was the last thing he heard in life, as the monster lurched against him, and a keen blade ripped through his belly. He gave one gasping cry, and slumped down limply on the stairway.

The barbarian loomed above him for an instant, ghoul-like, his eyes burning in the gloom. He knew the sound was heard, but the people in The Maze were

careful to attend to their own business. A death-cry on darkened stairs was nothing unusual. Later, some one would venture to investigate, but only after a reasonable lapse of time.

Conan went up the stairs and halted at a door he knew well of old. It was fastened within, but his blade passed between the door and the jamb and lifted the bar. He stepped inside, closing the door after him, and faced the girl who had betrayed him to the police.

The wench was sitting cross-legged in her shift on her unkempt bed. She turned white and stared at him as if at a ghost. She had heard the cry from the stairs, and she saw the red stain on the poniard in his hand. But she was too filled with terror on her own account to waste any time lamenting the evident fate of her lover. She began to beg for her life, almost incoherent with terror. Conan did not reply; he merely stood and glared at her with his burning eyes, testing the edge of his poniard with a calloused thumb.

At last he crossed the chamber, while she cowered back against the wall, sobbing frantic pleas for mercy. Grasping her yellow locks with no gentle hand, he dragged her off the bed.

Thrusting his blade back in its sheath, he tucked his squirming captive under his left arm, and strode to the window. Like most houses of that type, a ledge encircled each story, caused by the continuance of the window-ledges. Conan kicked the window open and stepped out on that narrow band. If any had been near or awake, they would have witnessed the bizarre sight of a man moving carefully along the ledge, carrying a kicking, half-naked wench under his arm.

They would have been no more puzzled than the girl.

Reaching the spot he sought, Conan halted, gripping the wall with his free hand. Inside the building rose a sudden clamor, showing that the body had at last been discovered. His captive whimpered and twisted, renewing her importunities. Conan glanced down into the muck and slime of the alleys below; he listened briefly to the clamor inside and the pleas of the wench; then he dropped her with great accuracy into a cesspool. He enjoyed her kickings and flounderings and the concentrated venom of her profanity for a few seconds, and even allowed himself a low rumble of laughter. Then he lifted his head, listened to the growing tumult within the building, and

decided it was time for him to kill Nabonidus.

III

It was a reverberating clang of metal that roused Murilo. He groaned and struggled dazedly to a sitting posture. About him all was silence and darkness, and for an instant he was sickened with the fear that he was blind. Then he remembered what had gone before, and his flesh crawled.

By the sense of touch he found that he was lying on a floor of evenly joined stone slabs.

Further groping discovered a wall of the same material. He rose and leaned against it, trying in vain to orient himself. That he was in some sort of a prison seemed certain, but where and how long he was unable to guess. He remembered dimly a clashing noise, and wondered if it had been the iron door of his dungeon closing on him, or if it betokened the entrance of an executioner.

At this thought he shuddered profoundly and began to feel his way along the wall.

Momentarily he expected to encounter the limits of his prison, but after awhile he came to the conclusion that he was travelling down a corridor. He kept to the wall, fearful of pits or other traps, and was presently aware of something near him in the blackness. He could see nothing, but either his ears had caught a stealthy sound, or some subconscious sense warned him. He stopped short, his hair standing on end; as surely as he lived, he felt the presence of some living creature crouching in the darkness in front of him.

He thought his heart would stop when a voice hissed in a barbaric accent: “Murilo! Is it you?”

“Conan!” Limp from the reaction, the young nobleman groped in the darkness and his hands encountered a pair of great naked shoulders.

“A good thing I recognized you,” grunted the barbarian. “I was about to stick you like a fattened pig.”

“Where are we, in Mitra’s name?”

“In the pits under the Red Priest’s house; but why –”

“What is the time?”

“Not long after midnight.”

Murilo shook his head, trying to assemble his scattered wits.

“What are you doing here?” demanded the Cimmerian.

“I came to kill Nabonidus. I heard they had changed the guard at your prison –”

“They did,” growled Conan. “I broke the new jailer’s head and walked out. I would have been here hours agone, but I had some personal business to attend to. Well, shall we hunt for Nabonidus?”

Murilo shuddered. “Conan, we are in the house of the archfiend! I came seeking a human enemy; I found a hairy devil out of hell!”

Conan grunted uncertainly; fearless as a wounded tiger as far as human foes were concerned, he had all the superstitious dreads of the primitive.

“I gained access to the house,” whispered Murilo, as if the darkness were full of listening ears.

“In the outer gardens I found Nabonidus’ dog mauled to death. Within the house I came upon 269

Joka, the servant. His neck had been broken. Then I saw Nabonidus himself seated in his chair, clad in his accustomed garb. At first I thought he too was dead. I stole up to stab him. He rose and faced me. Gods!” The memory of that horror struck the young nobleman momentarily speechless as he re-lived that awful instant.

“Conan,” he whispered, “it was no man that stood before me! In body and posture it was not unlike a *man*, but from the scarlet hood of the priest grinned a face of madness and nightmare!

It was covered with black hair, from which small pig-like eyes glared redly;

its nose was flat, with great flaring nostrils; its loose lips writhed back, disclosing huge yellow fangs, like the teeth of a dog. The hands that hung from the scarlet sleeves were misshapen and likewise covered with black hair. All this I saw in one glance, and then I was overcome with horror; my senses left me and I swooned."

"What then?" muttered the Cimmerian uneasily.

"I recovered consciousness only a short time ago; the monster must have thrown me into these pits. Conan, I have suspected that Nabonidus was not wholly human! He is a demon – a were-thing! By day he moves among humanity in the guise of men, and by night he takes on his true aspect."

"That's evident," answered Conan. "Every one knows there are men who take the form of wolves at will. But why did he kill his servants?"

"Who can delve the mind of a devil?" replied Murilo. "Our present interest is in getting out of this place. Human weapons can not harm a were-man. How did you get in here?"

"Through the sewer. I reckoned on the gardens being guarded. The sewers connect with a tunnel that lets into these pits. I thought to find some door leading up into the house unbolted."

"Then let us escape by the way you came!" exclaimed Murilo. "To the devil with it! Once out of this snake-den, we'll take our chance with the king's guardsmen, and risk a flight from the city. Lead on!"

"Useless," grunted the Cimmerian. "The way to the sewers is barred. As I entered the tunnel an iron grille crashed down from the roof. If I had not moved quicker than a flash of lightning, its spear-heads would have pinned me to the floor like a worm. When I tried to lift it, it wouldn't move. An elephant couldn't shake it. Nor could anything bigger than a rabbit squirm between the bars."

Murilo cursed, an icy hand playing up and down his spine. He might have known Nabonidus would not leave any entrance into his house unguarded. Had Conan not possessed the steel270

spring quickness of a wild thing, that falling portcullis would have skewered him. Doubtless his walking through the tunnel had sprung some hidden catch

that released it from the roof. As it was, both were trapped living.

“There’s but one thing to do,” said Murilo, sweating profusely. “That’s to search for some other exit; doubtless they’re all set with traps, but we have no other choice.”

The barbarian grunted agreement, and the companions began groping their way at random down the corridor. Even at that moment, something occurred to Murilo.

“How did you recognize me in this blackness?” he demanded.

“I smelled the perfume you put on your hair, when you came to my cell,” answered Conan. “I smelled it again a while ago, when I was crouching in the dark and preparing to rip you open.”

Murilo put a lock of his black hair to his nostrils; even so the scent was barely apparent to his civilized senses, and he realized how keen must be the organs of the barbarian.

Instinctively his hand went to his scabbard as they groped onward, and he cursed to find it empty. At that moment a faint glow became apparent ahead of them, and presently they came to a sharp bend in the corridor, about which the light filtered grayly. Together they peered around the corner, and Murilo, leaning against his companion, felt his huge frame stiffen. The young nobleman had also seen it – the body of a man, half naked, lying limply in the corridor beyond the bend, vaguely illumined by a radiance which seemed to emanate from a broad silver disk on the farther wall. A strange familiarity about the recumbent figure, which lay face down, stirred Murilo with inexplicable and monstrous conjectures. Motioning the Cimmerian to follow him, he stole forward and bent above the body. Overcoming a certain repugnance, he grasped it and turned it on its back. An incredulous oath escaped him; the Cimmerian grunted explosively.

“Nabonidus! The Red Priest!” ejaculated Murilo, his brain a dizzy vortex of whirling amazement. “Then who – what – ?”

The priest groaned and stirred. With cat-like quickness Conan bent over him, poniard poised above his heart. Murilo caught his wrist.

“Wait! Don’t kill him yet –”

“Why not?” demanded the Cimmerian. “He has cast off his were-guise, and

sleeps. Will you 271

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awaken him to tear us to pieces?”

“No, wait!” urged Murilo, trying to collect his jumbled wits. “Look! He is not sleeping – see that great blue welt on his shaven temple? He has been knocked senseless. He may have been lying here for hours.”

“I thought you swore you saw him in beastly shape in the house above,” said Conan.

“I did! Or else – he’s coming to! Keep back your blade, Conan; there is a mystery here even darker than I thought. I must have words with this priest, before we kill him.”

Nabonidus lifted a hand vaguely to his bruised temple, mumbled, and opened his eyes. For an instant they were blank and empty of intelligence; then life came back to them with a jerk, and he sat up, staring at the companions. Whatever terrific jolt had temporarily addled his razor-keen brain, it was functioning with its accustomed vigor again. His eyes shot swiftly about him, then came back to rest on Murilo’s face.

“You honor my poor house, young sir,” he laughed coolly, glancing at the great figure that loomed behind the young nobleman’s shoulder. “You have brought a bravo, I see. Was your sword not sufficient to sever the life of my humble self?”

“Enough of this,” impatiently returned Murilo. “How long have you lain here?”

“A peculiar question to put to a man just recovering consciousness,” answered the priest. “I do not know what time it now is. But it lacked an hour or so of midnight when I was set upon.”

“Then who is it that masquerades in your own gown in the house above?” demanded Murilo.

“That will be Thak,” answered Nabonidus, ruefully fingering his bruises. “Yes, that will be Thak. And in my gown? The dog!”

Conan, who comprehended none of this, stirred restlessly, and growled

something in his own tongue. Nabonidus glanced at him whimsically.

“Your bully’s knife yearns for my heart, Murilo,” he said. “I thought you might be wise enough to take my warning and leave the city.”

“How was I to know that was to be granted me?” returned Murilo. “At any rate, my interests are here.”

“You are in good company with that cutthroat,” murmured Nabonidus. “I had suspected you 272

for some time. That was why I caused that pallid court secretary to disappear. Before he died he told me many things, among others the name of the young nobleman who bribed him to filch state secrets, which the nobleman in turn sold to rival powers. Are you not ashamed of yourself, Murilo, you white-handed thief?”

“I have no more cause for shame than you, you vulture-hearted plunderer,” answered Murilo promptly. “You exploit a whole kingdom for your personal greed, and under the guise of disinterested statesmanship, you swindle the king, beggar the rich, oppress the poor, and sacrifice the whole future of the nation for your ruthless ambition. You are no more than a fat hog with his snout in the trough. You are a greater thief than I am. This Cimmerian is the most honest man of the three of us, because he steals and murders openly.”

“Well, then, we are all rogues together,” agreed Nabonidus equably. “And what now? My life?”

“When I saw the ear of the secretary that had disappeared, I knew I was doomed,” said Murilo abruptly, “and I believed you would invoke the authority of the king. Was I right?”

“Quite so,” answered the priest. “A court secretary is easy to do away with, but you are a bit too prominent. I had intended telling the king a jest about you in the morning.”

“A jest that would have cost me my head,” muttered Murilo. “Then the king is unaware of my foreign enterprises?”

“As yet,” sighed Nabonidus. “And now, since I see your companion has his knife, I fear that jest will never be told.”

“You should know how to get out of these rat-dens,” said Murilo. “Suppose I agree to spare your life. Will you help us to escape, and swear to keep silent about my thievery?”

“When did a priest keep an oath?” complained Conan, comprehending the trend of the conversation. “Let me cut his throat; I want to see what color his blood is. They say in The Maze that his heart is black, so his blood must be black too –”

“Be quiet,” whispered Murilo. “If he does not show us the way out of these pits, we may rot here. Well, Nabonidus, what do you say?”

“What does a wolf with his leg in the trap say?” laughed the priest. “I am in your power, and if we are to escape, we must aid one another. I swear, if we survive this adventure, to forget all your shifty dealings. I swear by the soul of Mitra!”

“I am satisfied,” muttered Murilo. “Even the Red Priest would not break that oath. Now to get out of here. My friend here entered by way of the tunnel, but a grille fell behind him and blocked the way. Can you cause it to be lifted?”

“Not from these pits,” answered the priest. “The control lever is in the chamber above the tunnel. There is only one other way out of these pits, which I will show you. But tell me, how did you come here?”

Murilo told him in a few words, and Nabonidus nodded, rising stiffly. He limped down the corridor, which here widened into a sort of vast chamber, and approached the distant silver disk. As they advanced the light increased, though it never became anything but a dim shadowy radiance. Near the disk they saw a narrow stair leading upward.

“That is the other exit,” said Nabonidus. “And I strongly doubt if the door at the head is bolted.

But I have an idea that he who would go through that door had better cut his own throat first.

Look into the disk.”

What had seemed a silver plate was in reality a great mirror set in the wall. A confusing system of copper-like tubes jutted out from the wall above it, bending down toward it at right angles.

Glancing into these tubes, Murilo saw a bewildering array of smaller mirrors. He turned his attention to the larger mirror in the wall, and ejaculated in amazement. Peering over his shoulder, Conan grunted.

They seemed to be looking through a broad window into a well-lighted chamber. There were broad mirrors on the walls, with velvet hangings between; there were silken couches, chairs of ebony and ivory, and curtained doorways leading off from the chamber. And before one doorway which was not curtained, sat a bulky black object that contrasted grotesquely with the richness of the chamber.

Murilo felt his blood freeze again as he looked at the horror which seemed to be staring directly into his eyes. Involuntarily he recoiled from the mirror, while Conan thrust his head truculently forward, till his jaws almost touched the surface, growling some threat or defiance in his own barbaric tongue.

“In Mitra’s name, Nabonidus,” gasped Murilo, shaken, “what is it?”

“That is Thak,” answered the priest, caressing his temple. “Some would call him an ape, but he is almost as different from a real ape as he is different from a real man. His people dwell far to the east, in the mountains that fringe the eastern frontiers of Zamora. There are not many of 274

them, but if they are not exterminated, I believe they will become human beings, in perhaps a hundred thousand years. They are in the formative stage; they are neither apes, as their remote ancestors were, nor men, as their remote descendants may be. They dwell in the high crags of well-nigh inaccessible mountains, knowing nothing of fire or the making of shelter or garments, or the use of weapons. Yet they have a language of a sort, consisting mainly of grunts and clicks.

“I took Thak when he was a cub, and he learned what I taught him much more swiftly and thoroughly than any true animal could have done. He was at once bodyguard and servant. But I forgot that being partly a man, he could not be submerged into a mere shadow of myself, like a true animal. Apparently his semi-brain retained impressions of hate, resentment, and some sort of bestial ambition of its own.

“At any rate, he struck when I least expected it. Last night he appeared to go suddenly mad. His actions had all the appearance of bestial insanity, yet I know that they must have been the result of long and careful planning.

“I heard a sound of fighting in the garden, and going to investigate – for I believed it was yourself, being dragged down by my watch-dog – I saw Thak emerge from the shrubbery dripping with blood. Before I was aware of his intention, he sprang at me with an awful scream and struck me senseless. I remember no more, but can only surmise that, following some whim of his semi-human brain, he stripped me of my gown and cast me still living into the pits – for what reason, only the gods can guess. He must have killed the dog when he came from the garden, and after he struck me down, he evidently killed Joka, as you saw the man lying dead in the house. Joka would have come to my aid, even against Thak, whom he always hated.”

Murilo stared in the mirror at the creature which sat with such monstrous patience before the closed door. He shuddered at the sight of the great black hands, thickly grown with hair that was almost fur-like. The body was thick, broad and stooped. The unnaturally wide shoulders had burst the scarlet gown, and on these shoulders Murilo noted the same thick growth of black hair. The face peering from the scarlet hood was utterly bestial, and yet Murilo realized that Nabonidus spoke truth when he said that Thak was not wholly a beast. There was something in the red murky eyes, something in the creature’s clumsy posture, something in the whole appearance of the thing that set it apart from the truly animal. That monstrous body housed a brain and soul that were just budding awfully into something vaguely human. Murilo stood aghast as he recognized a faint and hideous kinship between his kind and that squatting monstrosity, and he was nauseated by a fleeting realization of the abysses of bellowing bestiality up through which humanity had painfully toiled.

“Surely he sees us,” muttered Conan. “Why does he not charge us? He could break this window with ease.”

Murilo realized that Conan supposed the mirror to be a window through which they were looking.

“He does not see us,” answered the priest. “We are looking into the chamber above us. That door that Thak is guarding is the one at the head of these

stairs. It is simply an arrangement of mirrors. Do you see those mirrors on the walls? They transmit the reflection of the room into these tubes, down which other mirrors carry it to reflect it at last on an enlarged scale in this great mirror."

Murilo realized that the priest must be centuries ahead of his generation, to perfect such an invention; but Conan put it down to witchcraft, and troubled his head no more about it.

"I constructed these pits for a place of refuge as well as a dungeon," the priest was saying.

"There are times when I have taken refuge here, and through these mirrors, watched doom fall upon those who sought me with ill intent."

"But why is Thak watching that door?" demanded Murilo.

"He must have heard the falling of the grating in the tunnel. It is connected with bells in the chambers above. He knows some one is in the pits, and he is waiting for him to come up the stairs. Oh, he has learned well the lessons I taught him. He has seen what happened to men who came through that door, when I tugged at the rope that hangs on yonder wall, and he waits to mimic me."

"And while he waits, what are we to do?" demanded Murilo.

"There is naught we can do, except watch him. As long as he is in that chamber, we dare not ascend the stairs. He has the strength of a true gorilla, and could easily tear us all to pieces. But he does not need to exert his muscles; if we open that door he has but to tug that rope, and blast us into eternity."

"How?"

"I bargained to help you escape," answered the priest; "not to betray my secrets."

Murilo started to reply, then stiffened suddenly. A stealthy hand had parted the curtains of one of the doorways. Between them appeared a dark face whose glittering eyes fixed menacingly on the squat form in the scarlet robe.

“Petreus!” hissed Nabonidus. “Mitra, what a gathering of vultures this night is!”

The face remained framed between the parted curtains. Over the intruder’s shoulder other faces peered – dark, thin faces, alight with sinister eagerness.

“What do they here?” muttered Murilo, unconsciously lowering his voice, although he knew they could not hear him.

“Why, what would Petreus and his ardent young nationalists be doing in the house of the Red Priest?” laughed Nabonidus. “Look how eagerly they glare at the figure they think is their archenemy. They have fallen into your error; it should be amusing to watch their expressions when they are disillusioned.”

Murilo did not reply. The whole affair had a distinctly unreal atmosphere. He felt as if he were watching the play of puppets, or as a disembodied ghost himself, impersonally viewing the actions of the living, his presence unseen and unsuspected.

He saw Petreus put his finger warningly to his lips, and nod to his fellow-conspirators. The young nobleman could not tell if Thak were aware of the intruders. The apeman’s position had not changed, as he sat with his back toward the door through which the men were gliding.

“They had the same idea you had,” Nabonidus was muttering at his ear. “Only their reasons were patriotic rather than selfish. Easy to gain access to my house, now that the dog is dead.

Oh, what a chance to rid myself of their menace once and for all! If I were sitting where Thak sits – a leap to the wall – a tug on that rope –”

Petreus had placed one foot lightly over the threshold of the chamber; his fellows were at his heels, their daggers glinting dully. Suddenly Thak rose and wheeled toward him. The unexpected horror of his appearance, where they had thought to behold the hated but familiar countenance of Nabonidus, wrought havoc with their nerves, as the same spectacle had wrought upon Murilo. With a shriek Petreus recoiled, carrying his companions backward with him. They stumbled and floundered over each other, and in that instant Thak, covering the distance in one prodigious, grotesque leap, caught and jerked powerfully at a thick velvet rope which hung near the doorway.

Instantly the curtains whipped back on either hand, leaving the door clear, and down across it something flashed with a peculiar silvery blur.

“He remembered!” Nabonidus was exulting. “The beast is half a man! He had seen the doom performed, and he remembered! Watch, now! Watch! Watch!”

Murilo saw that it was a panel of heavy glass that had fallen across the doorway. Through it he saw the pallid faces of the conspirators. Petreus, throwing out his hands as if to ward off a charge from Thak, encountered the transparent barrier, and from his gestures, said something to his companions. Now that the curtains were drawn back, the men in the pits could see all that took place in the chamber that contained the nationalists. Completely unnerved, these ran across the chamber toward the door by which they had apparently entered, only to halt suddenly, as if stopped by an invisible wall.

“The jerk of the rope sealed that chamber,” laughed Nabonidus. “It is simple; the glass panels work in grooves in the doorways. Jerking the rope trips the spring that holds them. They slide down and lock in place, and can only be worked from outside. The glass is unbreakable; a man with a mallet could not shatter it. Ah!”

The trapped men were in a hysteria of fright; they ran wildly from one door to another, beating vainly at the crystal walls, shaking their fists wildly at the implacable black shape which squatted outside. Then one threw back his head, glared upward, and began to scream, to judge from the working of his lips, while he pointed toward the ceiling.

“The fall of the panels released the clouds of doom,” said the Red Priest with a wild laugh.

“The dust of the gray lotus, from the Swamps of the Dead, beyond the land of Khitai.”

In the middle of the ceiling hung a cluster of gold buds; these had opened like the petals of a great carven rose, and from them billowed a gray mist that swiftly filled the chamber. Instantly the scene changed from one of hysteria to one of madness and horror. The trapped men began to stagger; they ran in drunken circles. Froth dripped from their lips, which twisted as in awful laughter. Raging they fell upon one another with daggers and teeth, slashing,

tearing, slaying in a holocaust of madness. Murilo turned sick as he watched, and was glad that he could not hear the screams and howls with which that doomed chamber must be ringing. Like pictures thrown on a screen, it was silent.

Outside the chamber of horror Thak was leaping up and down in brutish glee, tossing his long hairy arms on high. At Murilo's shoulder Nabonidus was laughing like a fiend.

"Ha, a good stroke, Petreus! That fairly disemboweled him! Now one for you, my patriotic friend! So! They are all down, and the living tear the flesh of the dead with their slavering teeth."

Murilo shuddered. Behind him the Cimmerian swore softly in his uncouth tongue. Only death was to be seen in the chamber of the gray mist; torn, gashed and mangled, the conspirators lay 278

in a red heap, gaping mouths and blood-dabbled faces staring blankly upward through the slowly swirling eddies of gray.

Thak, stooping like a giant gnome, approached the wall where the rope hung, and gave it a peculiar sidewise pull.

"He is opening the farther door," said Nabonidus. "By Mitra, he is more of a human than even I had guessed! See, the mist swirls out of the chamber, and is dissipated. He waits, to be safe.

Now he raises the other panel. He is cautious – he knows the doom of the gray lotus, which brings madness and death. By Mitra!"

Murilo jerked about at the electric quality of the exclamation.

"Our one chance!" exclaimed Nabonidus. "If he leaves the chamber above for a few minutes, we will risk a dash up those stairs."

Suddenly tense, they watched the monster waddle through the doorway and vanish. With the lifting of the glass panel, the curtains had fallen again, hiding the chamber of death.

"We must chance it!" gasped Nabonidus, and Murilo saw perspiration break out on his face.

“Perhaps he will be disposing of the bodies as he has seen me do. Quick! Follow me up those stairs!”

He ran toward the steps and up them with an agility that amazed Murilo. The young nobleman and the barbarian were close at his heels, and they heard his gusty sigh of relief as he threw open the door at the top of the stairs. They burst into the broad chamber they had seen mirrored below. Thak was nowhere to be seen.

“He’s in that chamber with the corpses!” exclaimed Murilo. “Why not trap him there as he trapped them?”

“No, no!” gasped Nabonidus, an unaccustomed pallor tingeing his features. “We do not know that he is in there. He might emerge before we could reach the trap-rope, anyway! Follow me into this corridor; I must reach my chamber and obtain weapons which will destroy him. This corridor is the only one opening from this chamber which is not set with a trap of some kind.”

They followed him swiftly through a curtained doorway opposite the door of the death-chamber, and came into a corridor, into which various chambers opened. With fumbling haste Nabonidus began to try the doors on each side. They were locked, as was the door at the other 279

end of the corridor.

“My God!” The Red Priest leaned against the wall, his skin ashen. “The doors are locked, and Thak took my keys from me. We are trapped, after all.”

Murilo stared appalled to see the man in such a state of nerves, and Nabonidus pulled himself together with an effort.

“That beast has me in a panic,” he said. “If you had seen him tear men as I have seen – well, Mitra aid us, but we must fight him now with what the gods have given us. Come!”

He led them back to the curtained doorway, and peered into the great chamber in time to see Thak emerge from the opposite doorway. It was apparent that the beast-man had suspected something. His small, close-set ears twitched; he glared angrily about him, and approaching the nearest doorway, tore aside the curtains to look behind them.

Nabonidus drew back, shaking like a leaf. He gripped Conan's shoulder. "Man, do you dare pit your knife against his fangs?"

The Cimmerian's eyes blazed in answer.

"Quick!" the Red Priest whispered, thrusting him behind the curtains, close against the wall.

"As he will find us soon enough, we will draw him to us. As he rushes past you, sink your blade in his back if you can. You, Murilo, show yourself to him, and then flee up the corridor.

Mitra knows, we have no chance with him in hand-to-hand combat, but we are doomed anyway when he finds us."

Murilo felt his blood congeal in his veins, but he steeled himself, and stepped outside the doorway. Instantly Thak, on the other side of the chamber, wheeled, glared, and charged with a thunderous roar. His scarlet hood had fallen back, revealing his black misshapen head; his black hands and red robe were splashed with a brighter red. He was like a crimson and black nightmare as he rushed across the chamber, fangs bared, his bowed legs hurtling his enormous body along at a terrifying gait.

Murilo turned and ran back into the corridor, and quick as he was, the shaggy horror was almost at his heels. Then as the monster rushed past the curtains, from among them catapulted a great form that struck full on the apeman's shoulders, at the same instant driving the poniard into the brutish back. Thak screamed horribly as the impact knocked him off his feet, and the combatants hit the floor together. Instantly there began a whirl and thrash of limbs, the tearing and rending of a fiendish battle.

Murilo saw that the barbarian had locked his legs about the apeman's torso, and was striving to maintain his position on the monster's back, while he butchered it with his poniard. Thak, on the other hand, was striving to dislodge his clinging foe, to drag him around within reach of the giant fangs that gaped for his flesh. In a whirlwind of blows and scarlet tatters they rolled along the corridor, revolving so swiftly that Murilo dared not use the chair he had caught up, lest he strike the Cimmerian. And he saw that in spite of the handicap of Conan's first hold, and the voluminous robe that lashed and

wrapped about the apeman's limbs and body, Thak's giant strength was swiftly prevailing. Inexorably he was dragging the Cimmerian around in front of him. The apeman had taken punishment enough to have killed a dozen men. Conan's poniard had sunk again and again into his torso, shoulders, and bull-like neck; he was streaming blood from a score of wounds, but unless the blade quickly reached some absolutely vital spot, Thak's inhuman vitality would survive to finish the Cimmerian, and after him, Conan's companions.

Conan was fighting like a wild beast himself, in silence except for his gasps of effort. The black talons of the monster and the awful grasp of those misshapen hands ripped and tore at him, the grinning jaws gaped for his throat. Then Murilo, seeing an opening, sprang and swung the chair with all his power, and with force enough to have brained a human being. The chair glanced from Thak's slanted black skull; but the stunned monster momentarily relaxed his rending grasp, and in that instant Conan, gasping and streaming blood, plunged forward and sank his poniard to the hilt in the apeman's heart.

With a convulsive shudder the beast-man started from the floor, then sank limply back. His fierce eyes set and glazed, his thick limbs quivered and became rigid.

Conan staggered dizzily up, shaking the sweat and blood out of his eyes. Blood dripped from his poniard and fingers, and trickled in rivulets down his thighs, arms and breast. Murilo caught at him to support him, but the barbarian shook him off impatiently.

"When I can not stand alone, it will be time to die," he mumbled, through mashed lips. "But I'd like a flagon of wine."

Nabonidus was staring down at the still figure as if he could not believe his own eyes. Black, hairy, abhorrent, the monster lay, grotesque in the tatters of the scarlet robe; yet more human than bestial, even so, and possessed somehow of a vague and terrible pathos.

Even the Cimmerian sensed this, for he panted: "I have slain a *man* tonight, not a *beast*. I will count him among the chiefs whose souls I've sent into the dark, and my women will sing of him."

Nabonidus stooped and picked up a bunch of keys on a golden chain. They had fallen from the apeman's girdle during the battle. Motioning his companions to follow him, he led them to a chamber, unlocked the door, and led the way inside. It was illumined like the others. The Red Priest took a vessel of wine from a table and filled crystal beakers. As his companions drank thirstily, he murmured: "What a night! It is nearly dawn, now. What of you, my friends?"

"I'll dress Conan's hurts, if you will fetch me bandages and the like," said Murilo, and Nabonidus nodded, and moved toward the door that let into the corridor. Something about his bowed head caused Murilo to watch him sharply. At the door the Red Priest wheeled suddenly.

His face had undergone a transformation. His eyes gleamed with his old fire, his lips laughed soundlessly.

"Rogues together!" his voice rang with its accustomed mockery. "But not fools together. You are the fool, Murilo!"

"What do you mean?" The young nobleman started forward.

"Back!" Nabonidus's voice cracked like a whip. "Another step and I will blast you!"

Murilo's blood turned cold as he saw that the Red Priest's hand grasped a thick velvet rope which hung among the curtains just outside the door.

"What treachery is this?" cried Murilo. "You swore –"

"I swore I would not tell the king a jest concerning you! I did not swear not to take matters into my own hands if I could. Do you think I would pass up such an opportunity? Under ordinary circumstances I would not dare to kill you myself, without sanction of the king, but now none will ever know. You will go into the acid-vats along with Thak and the nationalist fools, and none will be the wiser. What a night this has been for me! If I have lost some valuable servants, I have nevertheless rid myself of various dangerous enemies. Stand back! I am over the threshold, and you can not possibly reach me before I tug this cord and send you to hell. Not the gray lotus, this time, but something just as effective. Nearly every chamber in my house is a trap. And so, Murilo, fool that you are –"

Too quickly for the sight to follow, Conan caught up a stool and hurled it. Nabonidus instinctively threw up his arm with a cry, but not in time. The

missile crunched against his head, and the Red Priest swayed and fell face-down in a slowly widening pool of dark crimson.

“His blood was red, after all,” grunted Conan.

Murilo raked back his sweat-plastered hair with a shaky hand as he leaned against the table, 282

weak from the reaction of relief.

“It is dawn,” he said. “Let us get out of here, before we fall afoul of some other doom. If we can climb the outer wall without being seen, we won’t be connected with this night’s work. Let the police write their own explanation.”

He glanced at the body of the Red Priest where it lay etched in crimson, and shrugged his shoulders.

“He was the fool, after all; had he not paused to taunt us, he could have trapped us easily.”

“Well,” said the Cimmerian tranquilly, “he’s travelled the road all rogues must walk at last. I’d like to loot the house, but I suppose we’d best go.”

As they emerged into the dimness of the dawn-whitened garden, Murilo said: “The Red Priest has gone into the dark, so my road is clear in the city, and I have nothing to fear. But what of you? There is still the matter of that priest in The Maze, and –”

“I’m tired of this city anyway,” grinned the Cimmerian. “You mentioned a horse waiting at the Rat’s Den. I’m curious to see how fast that horse can carry me into another kingdom. There’s many a highway I want to travel before I walk the road Nabonidus walked this night.”

The Vale of Lost Women

The Vale of Lost Women

The thunder of the drums and the great elephant tusk horns was deafening,

but in Livia's ears the clamor seemed but a confused muttering, dull and far away. As she lay on the *angareb* in the great hut, her state bordered between delirium and semi-unconsciousness. Outward sounds and movements scarcely impinged upon her senses. Her whole mental vision, though dazed and chaotic, was yet centered with hideous certitude on the naked, writhing figure of her brother, blood streaming down the quivering thighs. Against a dim nightmare background of dusky interweaving shapes and shadows, that white form was limned in merciless and awful clarity. The air seemed still to pulsate with an agonized screaming, mingled and interwoven obscenely with a rustle of fiendish laughter.

She was not conscious of sensation as an individual, separate and distinct from the rest of the cosmos. She was drowned in a great gulf of pain – was herself but pain crystallized and manifested in flesh. So she lay without conscious thought or motion, while outside the drums bellowed, the horns clamored, and barbaric voices lifted hideous chants, keeping time to naked feet slapping the hard earth and open palms smiting one another softly.

But through her frozen mentality individual consciousness at last began slowly to seep. A dull wonder that she was still bodily unharmed first made itself manifest. She accepted the miracle without thanksgiving. The matter seemed meaningless. Acting mechanically, she sat up on the *angareb* and stared dully about her. Her extremities made feeble beginnings of motions, as if responding to blindly awakening nerve-centers. Her naked feet scruffed nervously at the hard-beaten dirt floor. Her fingers twitched convulsively at the skirt of the scanty under-tunic which constituted her only garment. Impersonally she remembered that once, it seemed long, long ago, rude hands had torn her other garments from her body, and she had wept with fright and shame. It seemed strange, now, that so small a wrong should have caused her so much woe.

The magnitude of outrage and indignity was only relative, after all, like everything else.

The hut door opened, and a black woman entered – a lithe pantherish creature, whose supple body gleamed like polished ebony, adorned only by a wisp of silk twisted about her strutting loins. The whites of her eyeballs reflected the firelight outside, as she rolled them with wicked meaning.

She bore a bamboo dish of food – smoking meat, roasted yams, mealies, unwieldy ingots of native bread – and a vessel of hammered gold, filled with *yarati* beer. These she set down on 284

the *angareb*, but Livia paid no heed; she sat staring dully at the opposite wall, hung with mats woven of bamboo shoots. The young black woman laughed evilly, with a flash of dark eyes and white teeth, and with a hiss of spiteful obscenity and a mocking caress that was more gross than her language, she turned and swaggered out of the hut, expressing more taunting insolence with the motions of her hips than any civilized woman could with spoken insults.

Neither the wench's words nor her actions had stirred the surface of Livia's consciousness. All her sensations were still turned inward. Still the vividness of her mental pictures made the visible world seem like an unreal panorama of ghosts and shadows. Mechanically she ate the food and drank the liquor without tasting either.

It was still mechanically that at last she rose and walked unsteadily across the hut, to peer out through a crack between the bamboos. It was an abrupt change in the timbre of the drums and horns that reacted upon some obscure part of her mind and made her seek the cause, without sensible volition.

At first she could make out nothing of what she saw; all was chaotic and shadowy, shapes moving and mingling, writhing and twisting, black formless blocks hewed out starkly against a setting of blood-red that dulled and glowed. Then actions and objects assumed their proper proportions, and she made out men and women moving about the fires. The red light glinted on silver and ivory ornaments; white plumes nodded against the glare; naked black figures strutted and posed, silhouettes carved out of darkness and limned in crimson.

On an ivory stool, flanked by giants in plumed head-pieces and leopard-skin girdles, sat a fat, squat shape, abysmal, repulsive, a toad-like chunk of blackness, reeking of the dank rotting jungle and the nighted swamps. The creature's pudgy hands rested on the sleek arch of his belly; his nape was a roll of sooty fat that seemed to thrust his bullet head forward. His eyes gleamed in the firelight, like live coals in a dead black stump. Their appalling vitality belied the inert suggestion of the gross body.

As the girl's gaze rested on that repellant figure, her body stiffened and tensed as frantic Life surged through her again. From a mindless automaton, she changed suddenly to a sentient mold of live, quivering flesh, stinging and burning. Pain was drowned in hate, so intense it in turn became pain; she felt hard and brittle, as if her body were turning to steel. She felt her hate flow almost tangibly out along the line of her vision; so it seemed to her that the

object of her emotion should fall dead from his carven stool because of its force.

But if Bajujh, king of Bakalah, felt any psychic discomfort because of the concentration of his captive, he did not show it. He continued to cram his frog-like mouth to capacity with handfuls of mealies scooped up from a vessel held up to him by a kneeling woman, and to stare down a broad lane which was being formed by the action of his subjects in pressing back on either hand.

Down this lane, walled with sweaty black humanity, Livia vaguely realized some important personage would come, judging from the strident clamor of drum and horn. And as she watched, one came.

A column of fighting men, marching three abreast, advanced toward the ivory stool, a thick line of waving plumes and glinting spears meandering through the motley crowd. At the head of the ebon spearmen strode a figure at the sight of which Livia started violently; her heart seemed to stop, then began to pound again, suffocatingly. Against that dusky background, this man stood out with vivid distinctness. He was clad like his followers in leopard-skin loin-clout and plumed head-piece, but he was a white man.

It was not in the manner of a suppliant or a subordinate that he strode up to the ivory stool, and sudden silence fell over the throng as he halted before the squatting figure. Livia felt the tenseness, though she only dimly knew what it portended. For a moment Bajujh sat, craning his short neck upward, like a great frog; then, as if pulled against his will by the other’s steady glare, he shambled up off his stool, and stood grotesquely bobbing his shaven head.

Instantly the tension was broken. A tremendous shout went up from the massed villagers, and at a gesture from the stranger, his warriors lifted their spears and boomed a salute royale for King Bajujh. Whoever he was, Livia knew the man must indeed be powerful in that wild land, if Bajujh of Bakalah rose to greet him. And power meant military prestige – violence was the only thing respected by those ferocious races.

Thereafter Livia stood with her eyes glued to the crack in the hut wall, watching the white stranger. His warriors mingled with the Bakalas, dancing, feasting, swigging beer. He himself, with a few of his chiefs, sat with Bajujh

and the headmen of Bakalah, cross-legged on mats, gorging and guzzling. She saw his hands dipped deep into the cooking pots with the others, saw his muzzle thrust into the beer vessel out of which Bajujh also drank. But she noticed, nevertheless, that he was accorded the respect due a king. Since he had no stool, Bajujh renounced his also, and sat on the mats with his guest. When a new pot of beer was brought, the king of Bakalah barely sipped it before he passed it to the white man. Power! All this ceremonial courtesy pointed to power – strength – prestige! Livia trembled in excitement as a breathless plan began to form in her mind.

So she watched the white man with painful intensity, noting every detail of his appearance. He was tall; neither in height nor in massiveness was he exceeded by many of the giant blacks. He moved with the lithe suppleness of a great panther. When the firelight caught his eyes, they burned like blue fire. High-strapped sandals guarded his feet, and from his broad girdle hung a sword in a leather scabbard. His appearance was alien and unfamiliar; Livia had never seen his like. But she made no effort to classify his position among the races of mankind. It was enough that his skin was white.

The hours passed, and gradually the roar of revelry lessened, as men and women sank into drunken sleep. At last Bajujh rose tottering, and lifted his hands, less a sign to end the feast, than a token of surrender in the contest of gorging and guzzling, and stumbling, was caught by his warriors who bore him to his hut. The white man rose, apparently none the worse for the incredible amount of beer he had quaffed, and was escorted to the guest hut by such of the Bakala headmen as were able to reel along. He disappeared into the hut, and Livia noticed that a dozen of his own spearmen took their places about the structure, spears ready. Evidently the stranger was taking no chances on Bajujh's friendship.

Livia cast her glance about the village, which faintly resembled a dusky Night of Judgment, what with the straggling streets strewn with drunken shapes. She knew that men in full possession of their faculties guarded the outer boma, but the only wakeful men she saw inside the village were the spearmen about the white man's hut – and some of these were beginning to nod and lean on their spears.

With her heart beating hammer-like, she glided to the back of her prison hut and out the door, passing the snoring guard Bajujh had set over her. Like an

ivory shadow she glided across the space between her hut and that occupied by the stranger. On her hands and knees she crawled up to the back of that hut. A black giant squatted here, his plumed head sunk on his knees. She wriggled past him to the wall of the hut. She had first been imprisoned in that hut, and a narrow aperture in the wall, hidden inside by a hanging mat, represented her weak and pathetic attempt at escape. She found the opening, turned sidewise and wriggled her lithe body through, thrusting the inner mat aside.

Firelight from without faintly illumined the interior of the hut. Even as she thrust back the mat, she heard a muttered curse, felt a vise-like grasp in her hair, and was dragged bodily through the aperture and plumped down on her feet.

Staggering with the suddenness of it, she gathered her scattered wits together, and raked her disordered tresses out of her eyes, to stare up into the face of the white man who towered over her, amazement written on his dark scarred face. His sword was naked in his hand, and his eyes blazed like bale-fire, whether with anger, suspicion or surprize she could not judge. He spoke in a language she could not understand – a tongue which was not a negro guttural, yet did not have a civilized sound.

“Oh, please!” she begged. “Not so loud. *They* will hear –”

“Who are you?” he demanded, speaking Ophirean with a barbarous accent. “By Crom, I never thought to find a white girl in this hellish land!”

“My name is Livia,” she answered. “I am Bajujh’s captive. Oh, listen, please listen to me! I can 287

not stay here long. I must return before they miss me from my hut.

“My brother –” a sob choked her, then she continued: “My brother was Theteles, and we were of the house of Chelkus, scientists and noblemen of Ophir. By special permission of the king of Stygia, my brother was allowed to go to Kheshatta, the city of magicians, to study their arts, and I accompanied him. He was only a boy – younger than myself –” her voice faltered and broke. The stranger said nothing, but stood watching her with burning eyes, his face frowning and unreadable. There was something wild and untamable about him that frightened her and made her nervous and uncertain.

“The black Kushites raided Kheshatta,” she continued hurriedly. “We were approaching the city in a camel caravan. Our guards fled and the raiders carried us away with them. But they did us no harm, and let us know that they would parley with the Stygians and accept a ransom for our return. But one of the chiefs desired all the ransom for himself, and he and his followers stole us out of the camp one night, and fled far to the south-east with us, to the very borders of Kush. There they were attacked and cut down by a band of Bakala raiders. Theteles and I were dragged into this den of beasts –” she sobbed convulsively. “– This morning my brother was mutilated and butchered before me –” She gagged and went momentarily blind at the memory.

“They fed his body to the jackals. How long I lay in a faint I do not know –”

Words failing her, she lifted her eyes to the scowling face of the stranger. A mad fury swept over her; she lifted her fists and beat futilely on his mighty breast, which he heeded no more than the buzzing of a fly.

“How can you stand there like a dumb brute?” she screamed in a ghastly whisper. “Are you but a beast like these others? Ah, Mitra, once I thought there was honor in men. Now I know each has his price. You – what do you know of honor – or of mercy or decency? You are a barbarian like these others – only your skin is white, your soul is black as theirs.

“You care naught that a man of your own color has been foully done to death by these black dogs – that a white woman is their slave! Very well!” She fell back from him, panting, transfigured by her passion.

“I will give you a price!” she raved, tearing away her tunic from her ivory breasts. “Am I not fair? Am I not more desirable than these soot-colored wenches? Am I not a worthy reward for blood-letting? Is not a fair-skinned virgin a price worth slaying for?

“Kill that black dog Bajujh! Let me see his cursed head roll in the bloody dust! Kill him! *Kill him!”* She beat her clenched fists together in the agony of her intensity. “Then take me and do as you wish with me. I will be your slave!”

He did not speak for an instant, but stood like a giant brooding figure of slaughter and destruction, fingering his hilt.

“You speak as if you were free to give yourself at your pleasure,” he said. “As if the gift of your body had power to swing kingdoms. Why should I kill Bajujh to obtain you? Women are cheap as plantains in this land, and their willingness or unwillingness matters as little. You value yourself too highly. If I wanted you, I wouldn’t have to fight Bajujh to take you. He would rather give you to me than to fight me.”

Livia gasped. All the fire went out of her, the hut reeled dizzily before her eyes. She staggered and sank in a crumpled heap on an *angareb*. Dazed bitterness crushed her soul as the realization of her utter helplessness was thrust brutally upon her. The human mind clings unconsciously to familiar values and ideas, even among surroundings and conditions alien and unrelated to those environs to which such values and ideas are adapted. In spite of all Livia had experienced, she had still instinctively supposed a woman’s consent the pivot point of such a game as she proposed to play. She was stunned by the realization that nothing hinged upon her at all. She could not move men as pawns in a game; she herself was the helpless pawn.

“I see the absurdity of supposing that any man in this corner of the world would act according to rules and customs existent in another corner of the planet,” she murmured weakly, scarcely conscious of what she was saying, which was indeed only the vocal framing of the thought which overcame her. Stunned by that newest twist of fate, she lay motionless, until the white barbarian’s iron fingers closed on her shoulder and lifted her again to her feet.

“You said I was a barbarian,” he said harshly, “and that is true, Crom be thanked. If you had had men of the outlands guarding you instead of soft-gutted civilized weaklings, you would not be the slave of a black pig this night. I am Conan, a Cimmerian, and I live by the sword’s edge.

But I am not such a dog as to leave a white woman in the clutches of a black man; and though your kind call me a robber, I never forced a woman against her consent. Customs differ in various countries, but if a man is strong enough, he can enforce a few of his native customs anywhere. And no man ever called me a weakling!

“If you were old and ugly as the devil’s pet vulture, I’d take you away from Bajujh, simply because of the color of your hide.

“But you are young and beautiful, and I have looked at black sluts until I am sick at the guts.

I’ll play this game your way, simply because some of your instincts

correspond with some of mine. Get back to your hut. Bajujh's too drunk to come to you tonight, and I'll see that he's occupied tomorrow. And tomorrow night it will be Conan's bed you'll warm, not Bajujh's."

"How will it be accomplished?" She was trembling with mingled emotions. "Are these all your warriors?"

"They're enough," he grunted. "Bamulas, every one of them, and suckled at the teats of war. I came here at Bajujh's request. He wants me to join him in an attack on Jihiji. Tonight we feasted. Tomorrow we hold council. When I get through with him, he'll be holding council in Hell."

"You will break the truce?"

"Truces in this land are made to be broken," he answered grimly. "He would break his truce with Jihiji. And after we'd looted the town together, he'd wipe me out the first time he caught me off guard. What would be blackest treachery in another land, is wisdom here. I have not fought my way alone to the position of war-chief of the Bamulas without learning all the lessons the black country teaches. Now go back to your hut and sleep, knowing that it is not for Bajujh but for Conan that you preserve your beauty!"

II

Through the crack in the bamboo wall, Livia watched, her nerves taut and trembling. All day, since their late waking, bleary and sodden, from their debauch of the night before, the black people had prepared the feast for the coming night. All day Conan the Cimmerian had sat in the hut of Bajujh, and what had passed between them, Livia could not know. She had fought to hide her excitement from the only person who entered her hut – the vindictive black girl who brought her food and drink. But that ribald wench had been too groggy from her libations of the previous night to notice the change in her captive's demeanor.

Now night had fallen again, fires lighted the village, and once more the chiefs left the king's hut and squatted down in the open space between the huts to feast and hold a final, ceremonious council. This time there was not so much beer-guzzling. Livia noticed the Bamulas casually converging toward the circle where sat the chief men. She saw Bajujh, and sitting opposite him

across the eating-pots, Conan, laughing and conversing with the giant Aja, Bajujh's war-chief.

The Cimmerian was gnawing a great beef-bone, and as she watched, she saw him cast a glance across his shoulder. As if it were a signal for which they had been waiting, the Bamulas all turned their gaze toward their chief. Conan rose, still smiling, as if to reach into a near-by cooking pot – then quick as a cat he struck Aja a terrible blow with the heavy bone. The Bakala war-chief slumped over, his skull crushed in, and instantly a frightful yell rent the skies as the Bamulas went into action like blood-mad panthers.

Cooking-pots overturned, scalding the squatting women, bamboo walls buckled to the impact of plunging bodies, screams of agony ripped the night, and over all rose the exultant *"Yee! yee!*

yee!" of the maddened Bamulas, the flame of spears that crimsoned in the lurid glow.

Bakalah was a madhouse that reddened into a shambles. The action of the invaders paralyzed the luckless villagers by its unexpected suddenness. No thought of attack by their guests had ever entered their woolly pates. Most of the spears were stacked in the huts, many of the warriors already half-drunk. The fall of Aja was a signal that plunged the gleaming blades of the Bamulas into a hundred unsuspecting bodies; after that it was massacre.

At her peep-hole Livia stood frozen, white as a statue, her golden locks drawn back and grasped in a knotted cluster with both hands at her temples. Her eyes were dilated, her whole body rigid. The yells of pain and fury smote her tortured nerves like a physical impact; the writhing, slashing forms blurred before her, then sprang out again with horrifying distinctness.

She saw spears sink into writhing black bodies, spilling red. She saw clubs swing and descend with brutal force on kinky heads. Brands were kicked out of the fires, scattering sparks; hut-thatches smoldered and blazed up. A fresh stridency of anguish cut through the cries, as living victims were hurled headfirst into the blazing structures. The scent of scorched flesh began to sicken the air, already rank with reeking sweat and fresh blood.

Livia's overwrought nerves gave way. She cried out again and again, shrill

screams of torment, lost in the roar of flames and slaughter. She beat her temples with her clenched fists. Her reason tottered, changing her cries to more awful peals of hysterical laughter. In vain she sought to keep before her the fact that it was her enemies who were dying thus horribly – that this was as she had madly hoped and plotted – that this ghastly sacrifice was but a just repayment for the wrongs done her and hers. Frantic terror held her in its unreasoning grasp.

She was aware of no pity for the victims who were dying wholesale under the dripping spears.

Her only emotion was blind, stark, mad, unreasoning fear. She saw Conan, his white form contrasting with the blacks. She saw his sword flash, and men went down around him. Now a struggling knot swept around a fire, and she glimpsed a fat squat shape writhing in its midst.

Conan ploughed through and was hidden from view by the twisting black figures. From the midst a thin squealing rose unbearably. The press split for an instant, and she had one awful glimpse of a reeling desperate squat figure, streaming blood. Then the throng crowded in again, and steel flashed in the mob like a beam of lightning through the dusk.

A beast-like baying rose, terrifying in its primitive exultation. Through the mob Conan’s tall form pushed its way. He was striding toward the hut where the girl cowered, and in his hand he bore a ghastly relic – the firelight gleamed redly on King Bajujh’s severed head. The black eyes, glassy now instead of vital, rolled up, revealing only the whites; the jaw hung slack as if in a grin of idiocy; red drops showered thickly along the ground.

Livia gave back with a moaning cry. Conan had paid the price, and was coming to claim her, bearing the awful token of his payment. He would grasp her with his hot bloody fingers, crush 291

her lips with mouth still panting from the slaughter. With the thought came delirium.

With a scream Livia ran across the hut, threw herself against the door in the back wall. It fell open, and she darted across the open space, a flitting white ghost in a realm of black shadows and red flame.

Some obscure instinct led her to the pen where the horses were kept. A

warrior was just taking down the bars that separated the horse-pen from the main boma, and he yelled in amazement as she darted past him. His dusky hand clutched at her, closed on the neck of her tunic. With a frantic jerk she tore away, leaving the garment in his hand. The horses snorted and stampeded past her, rolling the black man in the dust – lean, wiry steeds of the Kushite breed, already frantic with the fire and the scent of blood.

Blindly she caught at a flying mane, was jerked off her feet, struck the ground again on her toes, sprang high, pulled and scrambled herself upon the horse's straining back. Mad with fear the herd plunged through the fires, their small hoofs knocking sparks in a blinding shower. The startled black people had a wild glimpse of the girl clinging naked to the mane of a beast that raced like the wind that streamed out his rider's loose yellow hair. Then straight for the boma the steed bolted, soared breath-takingly into the air, and was gone into the night.

III

Livia could make no attempt to guide her steed, nor did she feel any need of so doing. The yells and the glow of the fires were fading out behind her; the wind tossed her hair and caressed her naked limbs. She was aware only of a dazed need to hold to the flowing mane and ride, ride, ride over the rim of the world and away from all agony and grief and horror.

And for hours the wiry steed raced, until, topping a star-lit crest, he stumbled and hurled his rider headlong.

She struck on soft cushioning sward, and lay for an instant half stunned, dimly hearing her mount trot away. When she staggered up, the first thing that impressed her was the silence. It was an almost tangible thing, soft, darkly velvet, after the incessant blare of barbaric horns and drums which had maddened her for days. She stared up at the great white stars clustered thickly in the dark blue sky. There was no moon, yet the starlight illuminated the land, though illusively, with unexpected clusterings of shadow. She stood on a swarded eminence from which the gently molded slopes ran away, soft as velvet under the starlight. Far away in one direction she discerned a dense dark line of trees which marked the distant forest. Here there was only night and trancelike stillness and a faint breeze blowing through the stars.

The land seemed vast and slumbering. The warm caress of the breeze made her aware of her 292

nakedness and she wriggled uneasily, spreading her hands over her body. Then she felt the loneliness of the night, and the unbrokenness of the solitude. She was alone; she stood naked on the summit of the land and there was none to see; nothing but night and the whispering wind.

She was suddenly glad of the night and the loneliness. There was none to threaten her, or to seize her with rude violent hands. She looked before her and saw the slope falling away into a broad valley; there fronds waved thickly and the starlight reflected whitely on many small objects scattered throughout the vale. She thought they were great white blossoms, and the thought gave rise to vague memory; she thought of a valley of which the blacks had spoken with fear; a valley to which had fled the young women of a strange brown-skinned race which had inhabited the land before the coming of the ancestors of the Bakalas. There, men said, they had turned into white flowers, had been transformed by the old gods to escape their ravishers.

There no black man dared go.

But into that valley Livia dared go. She would go down those grassy slopes which were like velvet under her tender feet; she would dwell there among the nodding white blossoms, and no man would ever come to lay hot, rude hands on her. Conan had said that pacts were made to be broken; she would break her pact with him. She would go into the vale of the lost women – she would lose herself in solitude and stillness . . . Even as these dreamy and disjointed thoughts floated through her consciousness, she was descending the gentle slopes, and the tiers of the valley walls were rising higher on each hand.

But so gentle were their slopes that when she stood on the valley floor, she did not have the feeling of being imprisoned by rugged walls. All about her floated seas of shadow, and great white blossoms nodded and whispered to her. She wandered at random, parting the fronds before her with her small hands, listening to the whisper of the wind through the leaves, finding a childish pleasure in the gurgling of an unseen stream. She moved as in a dream, in the grasp of a strange unreality. One thought reiterated itself continually: there she was safe from the brutality of men. She wept, but the tears were of joy. She lay full length upon the sward and clutched the soft grass as if she would crush her new-found refuge to her breast and hold it there forever.

She plucked the petals of the great white blossoms and fashioned them into a chaplet for her golden hair. Their perfume was in keeping with all other things

in the valley, dreamy, subtle, enchanting.

So she came at last to a glade in the midst of the valley, and saw there a great stone, hewn as if by human hands, and adorned with ferns and blossoms and chains of flowers. She stood staring at it, and then there was movement and life about her. Turning, she saw figures stealing from the denser shadows – slender brown women, lithe, naked, with blossoms in their night-black hair. Like creatures of a dream they came about her, and they did not speak. But suddenly 293

terror seized her as she looked into their eyes. Those eyes were luminous, radiant in the starshine; but they were not human eyes. The forms were human, but in the souls a strange change had been wrought; a change reflected in their glowing eyes. Fear descended on Livia in a wave. The serpent reared its grisly head in her new-found Paradise.

But she could not flee. The lithe brown women were all about her. One, lovelier than the rest, came silently up to the trembling girl, and enfolded her with supple brown arms. Her breath was scented with the same perfume that stole from the great white blossoms that waved in the starshine. Her lips pressed Livia's in a long terrible kiss. The Ophirean felt coldness running through her veins; her limbs turned brittle; like a white statue of marble she lay in the arms of her captress, incapable of speech or movement.

Quick soft hands lifted her and laid her on the altar-stone amidst a bed of flowers. The brown women joined hands in a ring and moved supplely about the altar, dancing a strange dark measure. Never the sun or the moon looked on such a dance, and the great white stars grew whiter and glowed with a more luminous light as if its dark witchery struck response in things cosmic and elemental.

And a low chant arose, that was less human than the gurgling of the distant stream; a rustle of voices like the whispering of the great white blossoms that waved beneath the stars. Livia lay, conscious but without power of movement. It did not occur to her to doubt her sanity. She sought not to reason or analyze; she *was* and these strange beings dancing about her *were* ; a dumb realization of existence and recognition of the actuality of nightmare possessed her as she lay helplessly gazing up at the star-clustered sky, whence, she somehow knew with more than mortal knowledge, some *thing* would come to her, as it had come long ago to make these naked brown women the soulless beings they now were.

First, high above her, she saw a black dot among the stars, which grew and expanded; it neared her; it swelled to a bat; and still it grew, though its shape did not alter further to any great extent. It hovered over her in the stars, dropping plummet-like earthward, its great wings spread over her; she lay in its tenebrous shadow. And all about her the chant rose higher, to a soft paean of soulless joy, a welcome to the god which came to claim a fresh sacrifice, fresh and rose-pink as a flower in the dew of dawn.

Now it hung directly over her, and her soul shrivelled and grew chill and small at the sight. Its wings were bat-like; but its body and the dim face that gazed down upon her were like nothing of sea or earth or air; she knew she looked upon ultimate horror, upon black cosmic foulness born in night-black gulfs beyond the reach of a madman’s wildest dreams.

Breaking the unseen bonds that held her dumb, she screamed awfully. Her cry was answered by a deep menacing shout. She heard the pounding of rushing feet; all about her there was a swirl as of swift waters; the white blossoms tossed wildly, and the brown women were gone.

Over her hovered the great black shadow, and she saw a tall white figure, with plumes nodding in the stars, rushing toward her.

“Conan!” The cry broke involuntarily from her lips. With a fierce inarticulate yell, the barbarian sprang into the air, lashing upward with his sword that flamed in the starlight.

The great black wings rose and fell. Livia, dumb with horror, saw the Cimmerian enveloped in the black shadow that hung over him. The man’s breath came pantingly; his feet stamped the beaten earth, crushing the white blossoms into the dirt. The rending impact of his blows echoed through the night. He was hurled back and forth like a rat in the grip of a hound; blood splashed thickly on the sward, mingling with the white petals that lay strewn like a carpet.

And then the girl, watching that devilish battle as in a nightmare, saw the black-winged thing waver and stagger in mid-air; there was a threshing beat of crippled wings, and the monster had torn clear and was soaring upward to mingle and vanish among the stars. Its conqueror staggered dizzily, sword

poised, legs wide-braced, staring upward stupidly, amazed at victory, but ready to take up again the ghastly battle.

An instant later Conan approached the altar, panting, dripping blood at every step. His massive chest heaved, glistening with perspiration. Blood ran down his arms in streams from his neck and shoulders. As he touched her, the spell on the girl was broken, and she scrambled up and slid from the altar, recoiling from his hand. He leaned against the stone, looking down at her, where she cowered at his feet.

“Men saw you ride out of the village,” he said. “I followed as soon as I could, and picked up your track, though it was no easy task following it by torchlight. I tracked you to the place where your horse threw you, and though the torches were exhausted by then, and I could not find the prints of your bare feet on the sward, I felt sure you had descended into the valley. My men would not follow me, so I came alone on foot. What vale of devils is this? What was that thing?”

“A god,” she whispered. “The black people spoke of it – a god from far away and long ago!”

“A devil from the Outer Dark,” he grunted. “Oh, they’re nothing uncommon. They lurk as thick as fleas outside the belt of light which surrounds this world. I’ve heard the wise men of Zamora talk of them. Some find their way to Earth, but when they do, they have to take on earthly form and flesh of some sort. A man like myself, with a sword, is a match for any amount of fangs and talons, infernal or terrestrial. Come, my men await me beyond the ridge of the valley.”

She crouched motionless, unable to find words, while he frowned down at her. Then she spoke: 295

“I ran away from you. I planned to dupe you. I was not going to keep my promise to you. I was yours by the bargain we made, but I would have escaped from you if I could. Punish me as you will.”

He shook the sweat and blood from his locks, and sheathed his sword.

“Get up,” he grunted. “It was a foul bargain I made. I do not regret that black dog Bajujh, but you are no wench to be bought and sold. The ways of men vary in different lands, but a man need not be a swine, wherever he is. After I

thought awhile, I saw that to hold you to your bargain would be the same as if I had forced you. Besides, you are not tough enough for this land. You are a child of cities, and books, and civilized ways – which isn't your fault, but you'd die quickly following the life I thrive on. A dead woman would be no good to me. I will take you to the Stygian borders. The Stygians will send you home to Ophir."

She stared up at him as if she had not heard aright. "Home?" she repeated mechanically.

"Home? Ophir? My people? Cities, towers, peace, my *home?"* Suddenly tears welled into her eyes, and sinking to her knees, she embraced his knees in her arms.

"Crom, girl," grunted Conan, embarrassed, "don't do that; you'd think I was doing you a favor by kicking you out of this country; haven't I explained that you're not the proper woman for the war-chief of the Bamulas?"

The Devil in Iron

The Devil in Iron

The fisherman loosened his knife in its scabbard. The gesture was instinctive, for what he feared was nothing a knife could slay, not even the saw-edged crescent blade of the Yuetshi that could disembowel a man with an upward stroke. Neither man nor beast threatened him in the solitude which brooded over the castellated isle of Xapur.

He had climbed the cliffs, passed through the jungle that bordered them, and now stood surrounded by evidences of a vanished state. Broken columns glimmered among the trees, the straggling lines of crumbling walls meandered off into the shadows, and under his feet were broad paves, cracked and bowed by roots growing beneath.

The fisherman was typical of his race, that strange people whose origin is lost in the gray dawn of the past, and who have dwelt in their rude fishing-huts along the southern shore of the Sea of Vilayet since time immemorial. He was broadly built, with long apish arms and a mighty chest, but with lean loins and thin bandy legs. His face was broad, his forehead low and retreating, his

hair thick and tangled. A belt for a knife and a rag for a loin-cloth were all he wore in the way of clothing.

That he was where he was proved that he was less dully incurious than most of his people. Men seldom visited Xapur. It was uninhabited, all but forgotten, merely one among the myriad isles which dotted the great inland sea. Men called it Xapur, the Fortified, because of its ruins, remnants of some prehistoric kingdom, lost and forgotten before the conquering Hyborians had ridden southward. None knew who reared those stones, though dim legends lingered among the Yuetshi which half intelligibly suggested a connection of immeasurable antiquity between the fishers and the unknown island kingdom.

But it had been a thousand years since any Yuetshi had understood the import of these tales; they repeated them now as a meaningless formula, a gibberish framed to their lips by custom.

No Yuetshi had come to Xapur for a century. The adjacent coast of the mainland was uninhabited, a reedy marsh given over to the grim beasts that haunted it. The fisher’s village lay some distance to the south, on the mainland. A storm had blown his frail fishing-craft far from his accustomed haunts, and wrecked it in a night of flaring lightning and roaring waters on the towering cliffs of the isle. Now in the dawn the sky shone blue and clear, the rising sun made jewels of the dripping leaves. He had climbed the cliffs to which he had clung through the night because, in the midst of the storm, he had seen an appalling lance of lightning fork 297

out of the black heavens, and the concussion of its stroke, which had shaken the whole island, had been accompanied by a cataclysmic crash that he doubted could have resulted from a riven tree.

A dull curiosity had caused him to investigate; and now he had found what he sought and an animal-like uneasiness possessed him, a sense of lurking peril.

Among the trees reared a broken dome-like structure, built of gigantic blocks of the peculiar iron-like green stone found only on the islands of Vilayet. It seemed incredible that human hands could have shaped and placed them, and certainly it was beyond human power to have overthrown the structure they formed. But the thunderbolt had splintered the ton-heavy blocks like so much glass, reduced others to green dust, and ripped away the whole arch of the dome.

The fisherman climbed over the debris and peered in, and what he saw brought a grunt from him. Within the ruined dome, surrounded by stone-dust and bits of broken masonry, lay a man on a golden block. He was clad in a sort of skirt and a shagreen girdle. His black hair, which fell in a square mane to his massive shoulders, was confined about his temples by a narrow gold band. On his bare, muscular breast lay a curious dagger with a jeweled pommel, shagreenbound hilt, and a broad crescent blade. It was much like the knife the fisherman wore at his hip, but it lacked the serrated edge, and was made with infinitely greater skill.

The fisherman lusted for the weapon. The man, of course, was dead; had been dead for many centuries. This dome was his tomb. The fisherman did not wonder by what art the ancients had preserved the body in such a vivid likeness of life, which kept the muscular limbs full and unshrunken, the dark flesh vital. The dull brain of the Yuetshi had room only for his desire for the knife with its delicate waving lines along the dully gleaming blade.

Scrambling down into the dome, he lifted the weapon from the man’s breast. And as he did so, a strange and terrible thing came to pass. The muscular dark hands knotted convulsively, the lids flared open, revealing great dark magnetic eyes whose stare struck the startled fisherman like a physical blow. He recoiled, dropping the jeweled dagger in his perturbation. The man on the dais heaved up to a sitting position, and the fisherman gaped at the full extent of his size, thus revealed. His narrowed eyes held the Yuetshi and in those slitted orbs he read neither friendliness nor gratitude; he saw only a fire as alien and hostile as that which burns in the eyes of a tiger.

Suddenly the man rose and towered above him, menace in his every aspect. There was no room in the fisherman’s dull brain for fear, at least for such fear as might grip a man who has just seen the fundamental laws of nature defied. As the great hands fell to his shoulders, he drew his saw-edged knife and struck upward with the same motion. The blade splintered against the stranger’s corded belly as against a steel column, and then the fisherman’s thick neck broke like a rotten twig in the giant hands.

II

Jehungir Agha, lord of Khawarizm and keeper of the coastal border, scanned once more the ornate parchment scroll with its peacock seal, and laughed

shortly and sardonically.

“Well?” bluntly demanded his counsellor Ghaznavi.

Jehungir shrugged his shoulders. He was a handsome man, with the merciless pride of birth and accomplishment.

“The king grows short of patience,” said he. “In his own hand he complains bitterly of what he calls my failure to guard the frontier. By Tarim, if I can not deal a blow to these robbers of the steppes, Khawarizm may own a new lord.”

Ghaznavi tugged his gray-shot beard in meditation. Yezdigerd, king of Turan, was the mightiest monarch in the world. In his palace in the great port city of Aghrapur was heaped the plunder of empires. His fleets of purple-sailed war galleys had made Vilayet an Hyrkanian lake. The dark-skinned people of Zamora paid him tribute, as did the eastern provinces of Koth. The Shemites bowed to his rule as far west as Shushan. His armies ravaged the borders of Stygia in the south and the snowy lands of the Hyperboreans in the north. His riders bore torch and sword westward into Brythunia and Ophir and Corinthia, even to the borders of Nemedia. His gilt-helmeted swordsmen had trampled hosts under their horses’ hoofs, and walled cities went up in flames at his command. In the glutted slave markets of Aghrapur, Sultanapur, Khawarizm, Shahpur, and Khorusun, women were sold for three small silver coins

– blond Brythunians, tawny Stygians, dark-haired Zamorians, ebon Kushites, olive-skinned Shemites.

Yet, while his swift horsemen overthrew armies far from his frontiers, at his very borders an audacious foe plucked his beard with a red-dripping and smoke-stained hand.

On the broad steppes between the Sea of Vilayet and the borders of the easternmost Hyborian kingdoms, a new race had sprung up in the past half-century, formed originally of fleeing criminals, broken men, escaped slaves, and deserting soldiers. They were men of many crimes and countries, some born on the steppes, some fleeing from the kingdoms in the west. They were called *kozak*, which means wastrel.

Dwelling on the wild, open steppes, owning no law but their own peculiar code, they had become a people capable even of defying the Grand Monarch. Ceaselessly they raided the Turanian frontier, retiring in the steppes when defeated; with the pirates of Vilayet, men of much the same breed, they

harried the coast, preying off the merchant ships which plied 299

between the Hyrkanian ports.

“How am I to crush these wolves?” demanded Jehungir. “If I follow them into the steppes, I run the risk either of being cut off and destroyed, or having them elude me entirely and burn the city in my absence. Of late they have been more daring than ever.”

“That is because of the new chief who has risen among them,” answered Ghaznavi. “You know whom I mean.”

“Aye!” replied Jehungir feelingly. “It is that devil Conan; he is even wilder than the *kozaks*, yet he is crafty as a mountain lion.”

“It is more through wild animal instinct than through intelligence,” answered Ghaznavi. “The other *kozaks* are at least descendants of civilized men. He is a barbarian. But to dispose of him would be to deal them a crippling blow.”

“But how?” demanded Jehungir. “He has repeatedly cut his way out of spots that seemed certain death for him. And, instinct or cunning, he has avoided or escaped every trap set for him.”

“For every beast and for every man there is a trap he will not escape,” quoth Ghaznavi. “When we have parleyed with the *kozaks* for the ransom of captives, I have observed this man Conan.

He has a keen relish for women and strong drink. Have your captive Octavia fetched here.”

Jehungir clapped his hands, and an impassive Kushite eunuch, an image of shining ebony in silken pantaloons, bowed before him and went to do his bidding. Presently he returned, leading by the wrist a tall handsome girl, whose yellow hair, clear eyes and fair skin identified her as a pure-blooded member of her race. Her scanty silk tunic, girded at the waist, displayed the marvelous contours of her magnificent figure. Her fine eyes flashed with resentment and her red lips were sulky, but submission had been taught her during her captivity. She stood with hanging head before her master until he motioned her to a seat on the divan beside him. Then he looked inquiringly at Ghaznavi.

“We must lure Conan away from the *kozaks*,” said the counsellor abruptly. “Their war camp is at present pitched somewhere on the lower reaches of the Zaporoska River – which, as you well know, is a wilderness of reeds, a swampy jungle in which our last expedition was cut to pieces by those masterless devils.”

“I am not likely to forget that,” said Jehungir wryly.

“There is an uninhabited island near the mainland,” said Ghaznavi, “known as Xapur, the 300

Fortified, because of some ancient ruins upon it. There is a peculiarity about it which makes it perfect for our purpose. It has no shore-line, but rises sheer out of the sea in cliffs a hundred and fifty feet tall. Not even an ape could negotiate them. The only place where a man can go up or down is a narrow path on the western side that has the appearance of a worn stair, carved into the solid rock of the cliffs.

“If we could trap Conan on that island, alone, we could hunt him down at our leisure, with bows, as men hunt a lion.”

“As well wish for the moon,” said Jehungir impatiently. “Shall we send him a messenger, bidding him climb the cliffs and await our coming?”

“In effect, yes!” Seeing Jehungir’s look of amazement, Ghaznavi continued: “We will ask for a parley with the *kozaks* in regard to prisoners, at the edge of the steppes by Fort Ghori. As usual, we will go with a force and encamp outside the castle. They will come, with an equal force, and the parley will go forward with the usual distrust and suspicion. But this time we will take with us, as if by casual chance, your beautiful captive.” Octavia changed color and listened with intensified interest as the counsellor nodded toward her. “She will use all her wiles to attract Conan’s attention. That should not be difficult. To that wild reaver she should appear a dazzling vision of loveliness. Her vitality and substantial figure should appeal to him more vividly than would one of the doll-like beauties of your seraglio.”

Octavia sprang up, her white fists clenched, her eyes blazing and her figure quivering with outraged anger.

“You would force me to play the trollop with this barbarian?” she exclaimed. “I will not! I am no market-block slut to smirk and ogle at a steppes-robber. I

am the daughter of a Nemedian lord –”

“You were of the Nemedian nobility before my riders carried you off,” returned Jehungir cynically. “Now you are merely a slave who will do as she is bid.”

“I will not!” she raged.

“On the contrary,” rejoined Jehungir with studied cruelty, “you will. I like Ghaznavi’s plan.

Continue, prince among counsellors.”

“Conan will probably wish to buy her. You will refuse to sell her, of course, or to exchange her for Hyrkanian prisoners. He may then try to steal her, or take her by force – though I do not 301

think even he would break the parley-truce. Anyway, we must be prepared for whatever he might attempt.

“Then, shortly after the parley, before he has time to forget all about her, we will send a messenger to him, under a flag of truce, accusing him of stealing the girl, and demanding her return. He may kill the messenger, but at least he will think that she has escaped.

“Then we will send a spy – a Yuetshi fisherman will do – to the *kozak* camp, who will tell Conan that Octavia is hiding on Xapur. If I know my man, he will go straight to that place.”

“But we do not know that he will go alone,” Jehungir argued.

“Does a man take a band of warriors with him, when going to a rendezvous with a woman he desires?” retorted Ghaznavi. “The chances are all that he *will* go alone. But we will take care of the other alternative. We will not await him on the island, where we might be trapped ourselves, but among the reeds of a marshy point which juts out to within a thousand yards of Xapur. If he brings a large force, we’ll beat a retreat and think up another plot. If he comes alone or with a small party, we will have him. Depend upon it, he will come, remembering your charming slave’s smiles and meaning glances.”

“I will never descend to such shame!” Octavia was wild with fury and

humiliation. “I will die first!”

“You will not die, my rebellious beauty,” said Jehungir, “but you will be subjected to a very painful and humiliating experience.”

He clapped his hands, and Octavia paled. This time it was not the Kushite who entered, but a Shemite, a heavily muscled man of medium height with a short, curled, blue-black beard.

“Here is work for you, Gilzan,” said Jehungir. “Take this fool, and play with her awhile. Yet be careful not to spoil her beauty.”

With an inarticulate grunt the Shemite seized Octavia’s wrist, and at the grasp of his iron fingers, all the defiance went out of her. With a piteous cry she tore away and threw herself on her knees before her implacable master, sobbing incoherently for mercy.

Jehungir dismissed the disappointed torturer with a gesture, and said to Ghaznavi: “If your plan succeeds, I will fill your lap with gold.”

III

In the darkness before dawn an unaccustomed sound disturbed the solitude that slumbered over the reedy marshes and the misty waters of the coast. It was not a drowsy water-fowl nor a waking beast. It was a human who struggled through the thick reeds, which were taller than a man’s head.

It was a woman, had there been anyone to see, tall, and yellow-haired, her splendid limbs molded by her draggled tunic. Octavia had escaped in good earnest, every outraged fiber of her still tingling from her experience in a captivity that had become unendurable.

Jehungir’s mastery of her had been bad enough; but with deliberate fiendishness Jehungir had given her to a nobleman whose name was a byword for degeneracy even in Khawarizm.

Octavia’s resilient flesh crawled and quivered at her memories. Desperation had nerved her climb from Jelal Khan’s castle on a rope made of strips from torn tapestries, and chance had led her to a picketed horse. She had ridden all

night, and dawn found her with a foundered steed on the swampy shores of the sea. Quivering with the abhorrence of being dragged back to the revolting destiny planned for her by Jelal Khan, she plunged into the morass, seeking a hiding-place from the pursuit she expected. When the reeds grew thinner around her and the water rose about her thighs, she saw the dim loom of an island ahead of her. A broad span of water lay between, but she did not hesitate. She waded out until the low waves were lapping about her waist; then she struck out strongly, swimming with a vigor that promised unusual endurance.

As she neared the island, she saw that it rose sheer from the water in castle-like cliffs. She reached them at last, but found neither ledge to stand on below the water, nor to cling to above.

She swam on, following the curve of the cliffs, the strain of her long flight beginning to weight her limbs. Her hands fluttered along the sheer stone, and suddenly they found a depression.

With a sobbing gasp of relief, she pulled herself out of the water and clung there, a dripping white goddess in the dim starlight.

She had come upon what seemed to be steps carved in the cliff. Up them she went, flattening herself against the stone as she caught the faint clack of muffled oars. She strained her eyes and thought she made out a vague bulk moving toward the reedy point she had just quitted. But it was too far away for her to be sure, in the darkness, and presently the faint sound ceased, and she continued her climb. If it were her pursuers, she knew of no better course than to hide on the island. She knew that most of the islands off that marshy coast were uninhabited. This might be a pirate’s lair, but even pirates would be preferable to the beast she had escaped.

A vagrant thought crossed her mind as she climbed, in which she mentally compared her former master with the *kozak* chief with whom – by compulsion – she had shamelessly flirted in the pavilions of the camp by Fort Ghori, where the Hyrkanian lords had parleyed with the warriors of the steppes. His burning gaze had frightened and humiliated her, but his cleanly 303

elemental fierceness set him above Jelal Khan, a monster such as only an overly opulent civilization can produce.

She scrambled up over the cliff edge and looked timidly at the dense shadows

which confronted her. The trees grew close to the cliffs, presenting a solid mass of blackness.

Something whirred above her head and she cowered, even though realizing it was only a bat.

She did not like the looks of those ebony shadows, but she set her teeth and went toward them, trying not to think of snakes. Her bare feet made no sound in the spongy loam under the trees.

Once among them, the darkness closed frighteningly about her. She had not taken a dozen steps when she was no longer able to look back and see the cliffs and the sea beyond. A few steps more and she became hopelessly confused and lost her sense of direction. Through the tangled branches not even a star peered. She groped and floundered on, blindly, and then came to a sudden halt.

Somewhere ahead there began the rhythmical booming of a drum. It was not such a sound as she would have expected to hear in the time and place. Then she forgot it as she was aware of a presence near her. She could not see, but she knew that something was standing beside her in the darkness.

With a stifled cry she shrank back, and as she did so, something that even in her panic she recognized as a human arm curved about her waist. She screamed and threw all her supple young strength into a wild lunge for freedom, but her captor caught her up like a child, crushing her frantic resistance with ease. The silence with which her frenzied pleas and protests were received added to her terror as she felt herself being carried through the darkness toward the distant drum which still pulsed and muttered.

IV

As the first tinge of dawn reddened the sea, a small boat with a solitary occupant approached the cliffs. The man in the boat was a picturesque figure. A crimson scarf was knotted about his head; his wide silk breeches, of flaming hue, were upheld by a broad sash which likewise supported a simitar in a shagreen scabbard. His gilt-worked leather boots suggested the horseman rather than the seaman, but he handled his boat with skill. Through his widely open white silk shirt showed his broad muscular breast, burned brown by the sun.

The muscles of his heavy bronzed arms rippled as he pulled the oars with an almost feline ease of motion. A fierce vitality that was evident in each feature

and motion set him apart from common men; yet his expression was neither savage nor somber, though the smoldering blue eyes hinted at ferocity easily wakened. This was Conan, who had wandered into the armed 304

camps of the *kozaks* with no other possessions than his wits and his sword, and who had carved his way to leadership among them.

He paddled to the carven stair as one familiar with his environs, and moored the boat to a projection of the rock. Then he went up the worn steps without hesitation. He was keenly alert, not because he consciously suspected hidden danger, but because alertness was a part of him, whetted by the wild existence he followed.

What Ghaznavi had considered animal intuition or some sixth sense was merely the razor-edged faculties and savage wit of the barbarian. Conan had no instinct to tell him that men were watching him from a covert among the reeds of the mainland.

As he climbed the cliff, one of these men breathed deeply and stealthily lifted a bow. Jehungir caught his wrist and hissed an oath into his ear. “Fool! Will you betray us? Don’t you realize he is out of range? Let him get upon the island. He will go looking for the girl. We will stay here awhile. He *may* have sensed our presence or guessed our plot. He may have warriors hidden somewhere. We will wait. In an hour, if nothing suspicious occurs, we’ll row up to the foot of the stair and wait him there. If he does not return in a reasonable time, some of us will go upon the island and hunt him down. But I do not wish to do that if it can be helped. Some of us are sure to die if we have to go into the bush after him. I had rather catch him descending the stair, where we can feather him with arrows from a safe distance.”

Meanwhile the unsuspecting *kozak* had plunged into the forest. He went silently in his soft leather boots, his gaze sifting every shadow in eagerness to catch sight of the splendid tawny-haired beauty of whom he had dreamed ever since he had seen her in the pavilion of Jehungir Agha by Fort Ghori. He would have desired her even if she had displayed repugnance toward him. But her cryptic smiles and glances had fired his blood, and with all the lawless violence which was his heritage he desired that white-skinned golden-haired woman of civilization.

He had been on Xapur before. Less than a month ago he had held a secret conclave here with a pirate crew. He knew that he was approaching a point

where he could see the mysterious ruins which gave the island its name, and he wondered if he would find the girl hiding among them.

Even with the thought he stopped as though struck dead.

Ahead of him, among the trees, rose something that his reason told him was not possible. *It was a great dark green wall, with towers rearing beyond the battlements.*

Conan stood paralyzed in the disruption of the faculties which demoralizes anyone who is confronted by an impossible negation of sanity. He doubted neither his sight nor his reason, but something was monstrously out of joint. Less than a month ago only broken ruins had showed among the trees. What human hands could rear such a mammoth pile as now met his eyes, in the few weeks which had elapsed? Besides, the buccaneers who roamed Vilayet ceaselessly 305

would have learned of any work going on on such stupendous scale, and would have informed the *kozaks*.

There was no explaining this thing, but it was so. He was on Xapur and that fantastic heap of towering masonry was on Xapur, and all was madness and paradox; yet it was all true.

He wheeled to race back through the jungle, down the carven stair and across the blue waters to the distant camp at the mouth of the Zaporoska. In that moment of unreasoning panic even the thought of halting so near the inland sea was repugnant. He would leave it behind him, would quit the armed camps and the steppes, and put a thousand miles between him and the blue mysterious East where the most basic laws of nature could be set at naught, by what diabolism he could not guess.

For an instant the future fate of kingdoms that hinged on this gay-clad barbarian hung in the balance. It was a small thing that tipped the scales—merely a shred of silk hanging on a bush that caught his uneasy glance. He leaned to it, his nostrils expanding, his nerves quivering to a subtle stimulant. On that bit of torn cloth, so faint that it was less with his physical faculties than by some obscure instinctive sense that he recognized it, lingered the tantalizing perfume that he connected with the sweet firm flesh of the woman he had seen in Jehungir’s pavilion.

The fisherman had not lied, then; she *was* here! Then in the soil he saw a single track in the loam, the track of a bare foot, long and slender, but a man's, not a woman's, and sunk deeper than was natural. The conclusion was obvious; the man who made that track was carrying a burden, and what should it be but the girl the *kozak* was seeking?

He stood silently facing the dark towers that loomed through the trees, his eyes slits of blue bale-fire. Desire for the yellow-haired woman vied with a sullen primordial rage at whoever had taken her. His human passion fought down his ultra-human fears, and dropping into the stalking crouch of a hunting panther, he glided toward the walls, taking advantage of the dense foliage to escape detection from the battlements.

As he approached he saw that the walls were composed of the same green stone that had formed the ruins, and he was haunted by a vague sense of familiarity. It was as if he looked upon something he had never before seen, but had dreamed of, or pictured mentally. At last he recognized the sensation. The walls and towers followed the plan of the ruins. It was as if the crumbling lines had grown back into the structures they originally were.

No sound disturbed the morning quiet as Conan stole to the foot of the wall which rose sheer from the luxuriant growth. On the southern reaches of the inland sea the vegetation was almost tropical. He saw no one on the battlements, heard no sounds within. He saw a massive gate a short distance to his left, and had no reason to suppose that it was not locked and guarded. But 306

he believed that the woman he sought was somewhere beyond that wall, and the course he took was characteristically reckless.

Above him vine-festooned branches reached out toward the battlements. He went up a great tree like a cat, and reaching a point above the parapet, he gripped a thick limb with both hands, swung back and forth at arm's length until he had gained momentum, and then let go and catapulted through the air, landing cat-like on the battlements. Crouching there he stared down into the streets of a city.

The circumference of the wall was not great, but the number of green stone buildings it contained was surprizing. They were three or four stories in height, mainly flat-roofed, reflecting a fine architectural style. The streets converged like the spokes of a wheel into an octagon-shaped court in the

center of the town which gave upon a lofty edifice, which, with its domes and towers, dominated the whole city. He saw no one moving in the streets or looking out of the windows, though the sun was already coming up. The silence that reigned there might have been that of a dead and deserted city. A narrow stone stair ascended the wall near him; down this he went.

Houses shouldered so closely to the wall that half-way down the stair he found himself within arm's length of a window, and halted to peer in. There were no bars, and the silk curtains were caught back with satin cords. He looked into a chamber whose walls were hidden by dark velvet tapestries. The floor was covered with thick rugs, and there were benches of polished ebony, and an ivory dais heaped with furs.

He was about to continue his descent, when he heard the sound of someone approaching in the street below. Before the unknown person could round a corner and see him on the stair, he stepped quickly across the intervening space and dropped lightly into the room, drawing his simitar. He stood for an instant statue-like; then as nothing happened he was moving across the rugs toward an arched doorway when a hanging was drawn aside, revealing a cushioned alcove from which a slender, dark-haired girl regarded him with languid eyes.

Conan glared at her tensely, expecting her momentarily to start screaming. But she merely smothered a yawn with a dainty hand, rose from the alcove and leaned negligently against the hanging which she held with one hand.

She was undoubtedly a member of a white race, though her skin was very dark. Her square-cut hair was black as midnight, her only garment a wisp of silk about her supple hips.

Presently she spoke, but the tongue was unfamiliar to him, and he shook his head. She yawned again, stretched lithely, and without any show of fear or surprize, shifted to a language he did understand, a dialect of Yuetshi which sounded strangely archaic.

"Are you looking for someone?" she asked, as indifferently as if the invasion of her chamber by an armed stranger were the most common thing imaginable.

“Who are you?” he demanded.

“I am Yateli,” she answered languidly. “I must have feasted late last night, I am so sleepy now.

Who are you?”

“I am Conan, a *hetman* among the *kozaks*,” he answered, watching her narrowly. He believed her attitude to be a pose, and expected her to try to escape from the chamber or rouse the house.

But, though a velvet rope that might be a signal cord hung near her, she did not reach for it.

“Conan,” she repeated drowsily. “You are not a Dagonian. I suppose you are a mercenary.

Have you cut the heads off many Yuetshi?”

“I do not war on water rats!” he snorted.

“But they are very terrible,” she murmured. “I remember when they were our slaves. But they revolted and burned and slew. Only the magic of Khosatral Khel has kept them from the walls

–” She paused, a puzzled look struggling with the sleepiness of her expression. “I forgot,” she muttered. “They *did* climb the walls, last night. There was shouting and fire, and people calling in vain on Khosatral.” She shook her head as if to clear it. “But that can not be,” she murmured,

“because I am alive, and I thought I was dead. Oh, to the devil with it!”

She came across the chamber, and taking Conan’s hand, drew him to the dais. He yielded in bewilderment and uncertainty. The girl smiled at him like a sleepy child; her long silky lashes drooped over dusky, clouded eyes. She ran her fingers through his thick black locks as if to assure herself of his reality.

“It was a dream,” she yawned. “Perhaps it’s all a dream. I feel like a dream now. I don’t care. I can’t remember something – I have forgotten – there is something I can not understand, but I grow so sleepy when I try to think. Anyway, it doesn’t matter.”

“What do you mean?” he asked uneasily. “You said they climbed the walls

last night? Who?”

“The Yuetshi. I thought so, anyway. A cloud of smoke hid everything, but a naked, bloodstained devil caught me by the throat and drove his knife into my breast. Oh, it hurt! But it was a dream, because see, there is no scar.” She idly inspected her smooth bosom, and then sank upon Conan’s lap and passed her supple arms about his massive neck. “I can not remember,”

she murmured, nestling her dark head against his mighty breast. “Everything is dim and misty.

It does not matter. You are no dream. You are strong. Let us live while we can. Love me!”

He cradled the girl’s glossy head in the bend of his heavy arm and kissed her full red lips with unfeigned relish.

“You are strong,” she repeated, her voice waning. “Love me – love –” The sleepy murmur faded away; the dusky eyes closed, the long lashes drooping over the sensuous cheeks; the supple body relaxed in Conan’s arms.

He scowled down at her. She seemed to partake of the illusion that haunted this whole city, but the firm resilience of her limbs under his questing fingers convinced him that he had a living human girl in his arms, and not the shadow of a dream. No less disturbed, he hastily laid her on the furs upon the dais. Her sleep was too deep to be natural. He decided that she must be an addict of some drug, perhaps like the black lotus of Xuthal.

Then he found something else to make him wonder. Among the furs on the dais was a gorgeous spotted skin, whose predominant hue was golden. It was not a clever copy, but the skin of an actual beast. And that beast, Conan knew, had been extinct for at least a thousand years; it was the great golden leopard which figures so prominently in Hyborian legendry, and which the ancient artists delighted to portray in pigments and marble.

Shaking his head in bewilderment, Conan passed through the archway into a winding corridor.

Silence hung over the house, but outside he heard a sound which his keen ears

recognized as something ascending the stair on the wall from which he had entered the building. An instant later he was startled to hear something land with a soft but weighty thud on the floor of the chamber he had just quitted. Turning quickly away, he hurried along the twisting hallway until something on the floor before him brought him to a halt.

It was a human figure, which lay half in the hall and half in an opening that obviously was normally concealed by a door which was a duplicate of the panels of the wall. It was a man, dark and lean, clad only in a silk loin-cloth, with a shaven head and cruel features, and he lay as if death had struck him just as he was emerging from the panel. Conan bent above him, seeking the cause of his death, and discovered him to be merely sunk in the same deep sleep as the girl in the chamber.

But why should he select such a place for his slumbers? While meditating on the matter, Conan was galvanized by a sound behind him. Something was moving up the corridor in his direction.

A quick glance down it showed that it ended in a great door which might be locked. Conan jerked the supine body out of the panel-entrance and stepped through, pulling the panel shut after him. A click told him it was locked in place. Standing in utter darkness, he heard a shuffling tread halt just outside the door, and a faint chill trickled along his spine. That was no 309

human step, nor that of any beast he had ever encountered.

There was an instant of silence, then a faint creak of wood and metal. Putting out his hand he felt the door straining and bending inward, as if a great weight were being steadily borne against it from the outside. As he reached for his sword, this ceased and he heard a strange slobbering mouthing that prickled the short hairs on his scalp. Simitar in hand he began backing away, and his heels felt steps, down which he nearly tumbled. He was in a narrow staircase leading downward.

He groped his way down in the blackness, feeling for, but not finding, some other opening in the walls. Just as he decided that he was no longer in the house, but deep in the earth under it, the steps ceased in a level tunnel.

V

Along the black silent tunnel Conan groped, momentarily dreading a fall into

some unseen pit; but at last his feet struck steps again, and he went up them until he came to a door on which his fumbling fingers found a metal catch. He came out into a dim and lofty room of enormous proportions. Fantastic columns marched about the mottled walls, upholding a ceiling, which, at once translucent and dusky, seemed like a cloudy midnight sky, giving an illusion of impossible height. If any light filtered in from the outside it was curiously altered.

In a brooding twilight Conan moved across the bare green floor. The great room was circular, pierced on one side by the great bronze valves of a giant door. Opposite this, on a dais against the wall, up to which led broad curving steps, there stood a throne of copper, and when Conan saw what was coiled on this throne, he retreated hastily, lifting his simitar.

Then, as the thing did not move, he scanned it more closely, and presently mounted the glass steps and stared down at it. It was a gigantic snake, apparently carved of some jade-like substance. Each scale stood out as distinctly as in real life, and the iridescent colors were vividly reproduced. The great wedge-shaped head was half submerged in the folds of its trunk; so neither the eyes nor jaws were visible. Recognition stirred in his mind. This snake was evidently meant to represent one of those grim monsters of the marsh which in past ages had haunted the reedy edges of Vilayet's southern shores. But, like the golden leopard, they had been extinct for hundreds of years. Conan had seen rude images of them, in miniature, among the idol-huts of the Yuetshi, and there was a description of them in the *Book of Skelos*, which drew on prehistoric sources.

Conan admired the scaly torso, thick as his thigh and obviously of great length, and he reached out and laid a curious hand on the thing. And as he did so, his heart nearly stopped. An icy chill congealed the blood in his veins and lifted the short hair on his scalp. Under his hand there was not the smooth, brittle surface of glass or metal or stone, but the yielding, fibrous mass of a

living thing. He felt cold, sluggish life flowing under his fingers.

His hand jerked back in instinctive repulsion. Sword shaking in his grasp, horror and revulsion and fear almost choking him, he backed away and down the glass steps with painful care, glaring in awful fascination at the grisly thing that slumbered on the copper throne. It did not move.

He reached the bronze door and tried it, with his heart in his teeth, sweating with fear that he should find himself locked in with that slimy horror. But the valves yielded to his touch, and he glided through and closed them behind him.

He found himself in a wide hallway with lofty tapestried walls, where the light was the same twilight gloom. It made distant objects indistinct and that made him uneasy, rousing thoughts of serpents gliding unseen through the dimness. A door at the other end seemed miles away in the illusive light. Nearer at hand the tapestry hung in such a way as to suggest an opening behind it, and lifting it cautiously he discovered a narrow stair leading up.

While he hesitated he heard in the great room he had just left, the same shuffling tread he had heard outside the locked panel. Had he been followed through the tunnel? He went up the stair hastily, dropping the tapestry in place behind him.

Emerging presently into a twisting corridor, he took the first doorway he came to. He had a twofold purpose in his apparently aimless prowling: to escape from the building and its mysteries, and to find the Nemedian girl who, he felt, was imprisoned somewhere in this palace, temple, or whatever it was. He believed it was the great domed edifice in the center of the city, and it was likely that here dwelt the ruler of the town, to whom a captive woman would doubtless be brought.

He found himself in a chamber, not another corridor, and was about to retrace his steps, when he heard a voice which came from behind one of the walls. There was no door in that wall, but he leaned close and heard distinctly. And an icy chill crawled slowly along his spine. The tongue was Nemedian, but the voice was not human. There was a terrifying resonance about it, like a bell tolling at midnight.

“There was no life in the Abyss, save that which was incorporated in me,” it tolled. “Nor was there light, nor motion, nor any sound. Only the urge behind and beyond life guided and impelled me on my upward journey, blind, insensate, inexorable. Through ages upon ages, and the changeless strata of darkness I climbed –”

Ensorcelled by that belling resonance, Conan crouched forgetful of all else,

until its hypnotic power caused a strange replacement of faculties and perception, and sound created the illusion of sight. Conan was no longer aware of the voice, save as far-off rhythmical waves of sound.

Transported beyond his age and his own individuality, he was seeing the transmutation of the being men called Khosatral Khel which crawled up from Night and the Abyss ages ago to clothe itself in the substance of the material universe.

But human flesh was too frail, too paltry to hold the terrific essence that was Khosatral Khel.

So he stood up in the shape and aspect of a man, but his flesh was not flesh, nor the bone, bone, nor blood, blood. He became a blasphemy against all nature, for he caused to live and think and act a basic substance that before had never known the pulse and stir of animate being.

He stalked through the world like a god, for no earthly weapon could harm him, and to him a century was like an hour. In his wanderings he came upon a primitive people inhabiting the island of Dagonia, and it pleased him to give this race culture and civilization, and by his aid they built the city of Dagon and they abode there and worshipped him. Strange and grisly were his servants, called from the dark corners of the planet where grim survivals of forgotten ages yet lurked. His house in Dagon was connected with every other house by tunnels through which his shaven-headed priests bore victims for the sacrifice.

But after many ages a fierce and brutish people appeared on the shores of the sea. They called themselves Yuetshi, and after a fierce battle were defeated and enslaved, and for nearly a generation they died on the altars of Khosatral.

His sorcery kept them in bonds. Then their priest, a strange gaunt man of unknown race, plunged into the wilderness, and when he returned he bore a knife that was of no earthly substance. It was forged of a meteor which flashed through the sky like a flaming arrow and fell in a far valley. The slaves rose. Their saw-edged crescents cut down the men of Dagon like sheep, and against that unearthly knife the magic of Khosatral was impotent. While carnage and slaughter bellowed through the red smoke that choked the streets, the grimmest act of that grim drama was played in the cryptic dome behind the great daised chamber with its copper throne and its walls mottled like the skin of serpents.

From that dome the Yuetshi priest emerged alone. He had not slain his foe, because he wished to hold the threat of his loosing over the heads of his own rebellious subjects. He had left Khosatral lying upon the golden dais with the mystic knife across his breast for a spell to hold him senseless and inanimate until doomsday.

But the ages passed and the priest died, the towers of deserted Dagon crumbled, the tales became dim, and the Yuetshi were reduced by plagues and famines and war to scattered remnants, dwelling in squalor along the seashore.

Only the cryptic dome resisted the rot of time, until a chance thunderbolt and the curiosity of a fisherman lifted from the breast of the god the magic knife

and broke the spell. Khosatral Khel rose and lived and waxed mighty once more. It pleased him to restore the city as it was in the days before its fall. By his necromancy he lifted the towers from the dust of forgotten millenniums, and the folk which had been dust for ages moved in life again.

But folk who have tasted of death are only partly alive. In the dark corners of their souls and minds death still lurks unconquered. By night the people of Dagon moved and loved, hated and feasted, and remembered the fall of Dagon and their own slaughter only as a dim dream; they moved in an enchanted mist of illusion, feeling the strangeness of their existence but not inquiring the reasons therefor. With the coming of day they sank into deep sleep, to be roused again only by the coming of night, which is akin to death.

All this rolled in a terrible panorama before Conan's consciousness as he crouched beside the tapestried wall. His reason staggered. All certainty and sanity were swept away, leaving a shadowy universe through which stole hooded figures of grisly potentialities. Through the belling of the voice which was like a tolling of triumph over the ordered laws of a sane planet, a human sound anchored Conan's mind from its flight through spheres of madness. It was the hysterical sobbing of a woman.

Involuntarily he sprang up.

VI

Jehungir Agha waited with growing impatience in his boat among the reeds. More than an hour passed, and Conan had not reappeared. Doubtless he was still searching the island for the girl he thought to be hidden there. But another surmise occurred to the Agha. Suppose the *hetman* had left his warriors near by, and that they should grow suspicious and come to investigate his long absence? Jehungir spoke to the oarsmen, and the long boat slid from among the reeds and glided toward the carven stairs.

Leaving half a dozen men in the boat, he took the rest, ten mighty archers of Khawarizm, in spired helmets and tiger-skin cloaks. Like hunters invading the retreat of the lion, they stole forward under the trees, arrows on string. Silence reigned over the forest except when a great green thing that might have been a parrot swirled over their heads with a low thunder of broad wings, and then sped off through the trees. With a sudden gesture Jehungir halted his party, and they stared incredulously at the towers that showed through the verdure in the distance.

"Tarim!" muttered Jehungir. "The pirates have rebuilt the ruins! Doubtless

Conan is there. We must investigate this. A fortified town this close to the mainland! – Come!”

With renewed caution they glided through the trees. The game had altered; from pursuers and hunters they had become spies.

And as they crept through the tangled growth, the man they sought was in peril more deadly than their filigreed arrows.

Conan realized with a crawling of his skin that beyond the wall the belling voice had ceased.

He stood motionless as a statue, his gaze fixed on a curtained door through which he knew a culminating horror would presently appear.

It was dim and misty in the chamber, and Conan’s hair began to lift on his scalp as he looked.

He saw a head and a pair of gigantic shoulders grow out of the twilight gloom. There was no sound of footsteps, but the great dusky form grew more distinct until Conan recognized the figure of a man. He was clad in sandals, a skirt and a broad shagreen girdle. His square-cut mane was confined by a circlet of gold. Conan stared at the sweep of the monstrous shoulders, the breadth of swelling breast, the bands and ridges and clusters of muscles on torso and limbs.

The face was without weakness and without mercy. The eyes were balls of dark fire. And Conan knew that this was Khosatral Khel, the ancient from the Abyss, the god of Dagonia.

No word was spoken. No word was necessary. Khosatral spread his great arms, and Conan, crouching beneath them, slashed at the giant’s belly. Then he bounded back, eyes blazing with surprize. The keen edge had rung on the mighty body as on an anvil, rebounding without cutting. Then Khosatral came upon him in an irresistible surge.

There was a fleeting concussion, a fierce writhing and intertwining of limbs and bodies, and then Conan sprang clear, every thew quivering from the violence of his efforts; blood started where the grazing fingers had torn the

skin. In that instant of contact he had experienced the ultimate madness of blasphemed nature; no human flesh had bruised his, but *metal* animated and sentient; it was a body of living iron which opposed his.

Khosatral loomed above the warrior in the gloom. Once let those great fingers lock and they would not loosen until the human body hung limp in their grasp. In that twilit chamber it was as if a man fought with a dream-monster in a nightmare.

Flinging down his useless sword, Conan caught up a heavy bench and hurled it with all his power. It was such a missile as few men could even lift. On Khosatral's mighty breast it smashed into shreds and splinters. It did not even shake the giant on his braced legs. His face lost something of its human aspect, a nimbus of fire played about his awesome head, and like a moving tower he came on.

With a desperate wrench Conan ripped a whole section of tapestry from the wall and whirling it, with a muscular effort greater than that required for throwing the bench, he flung it over the giant's head. For an instant Khosatral floundered, smothered and blinded by the clinging stuff that resisted his strength as wood or steel could not have done, and in that instant Conan caught up his simitar and shot out into the corridor. Without checking his speed he hurled himself through the door of the adjoining chamber, slammed the door and shot the bolt.

Then as he wheeled he stopped short, all the blood in him seeming to surge to his head.

Crouching on a heap of silk cushions, golden hair streaming over her naked shoulders, eyes blank with terror, was the woman for whom he had dared so much. He almost forgot the horror at his heels until a splintering crash behind him brought him to his senses. He caught up the girl and sprang for the opposite door. She was too helpless with fright either to resist or to aid him.

A faint whimper was the only sound of which she seemed capable.

Conan wasted no time trying the door. A shattering stroke of his simitar hewed the lock asunder, and as he sprang through to the stair that loomed beyond it, he saw the head and shoulders of Khosatral crash through the other

door. The colossus was splintering the massive panels as if they were of cardboard.

Conan raced up the stair, carrying the big girl over one shoulder as easily as if she had been a child. Where he was going he had no idea, but the stair ended at the door of a round, domed chamber. Khosatral was coming up the stair behind them, silently as a wind of death, and as swiftly.

The chamber's walls were of solid steel, and so was the door. Conan shut it and dropped in place the great bars with which it was furnished. The thought struck him that this was Khosatral's chamber, where he locked himself in to sleep securely from the monsters he had loosed from the Pits to do his bidding.

Hardly were the bolts in place when the great door shook and trembled to the giant's assault.

Conan shrugged his shoulders. This was the end of the trail. There was no other door in the chamber, nor any window. Air, and the strange misty light, evidently came from interstices in the dome. He tested the nicked edge of his simitar, quite cool now that he was at bay. He had done his volcanic best to escape; when the giant came crashing through that door he would explode in another savage onslaught with his useless sword, not because he expected it to do any good, but because it was his nature to die fighting. For the moment there was no course of action to take, and his calmness was not forced or feigned.

The gaze he turned on his fair companion was as admiring and intense as if he had a hundred 315

years to live. He had dumped her unceremoniously on the floor when he turned to close the door, and she had risen to her knees, mechanically arranging her streaming locks and her scanty garment. Conan's fierce eyes glowed with approval as they devoured her thick golden hair, her clear wide eyes, her milky skin, sleek with exuberant health, the firm swell of her breasts, the contours of her splendid hips.

A low cry escaped her as the door shook and a bolt gave way with a groan.

Conan did not look around. He knew the door would hold a little while longer.

“They told me you had escaped,” he said. “A Yuetshi fisher told me you were hiding here.

What is your name?”

“Octavia,” she gasped mechanically. Then words came in a rush. She caught at him with desperate fingers. “Oh Mitra! what nightmare is this? The people – the dark-skinned people –

one of them caught me in the forest and brought me here. They carried me to – to that – that *thing*. He told me – he said – am I mad? Is this a dream?”

He glanced at the door which bulged inward as if from the impact of a battering-ram.

“No,” he said; “it’s no dream. That hinge is giving way. Strange that a devil has to break down a door like a common man; but after all, his strength itself is a diabolism.”

“Can you not kill him?” she panted. “You are strong.”

Conan was too honest to lie to her. “If a mortal man could kill him, he’d be dead now,” he answered. “I nicked my blade on his belly.”

Her eyes dulled. “Then you must die, and I must – oh Mitra!” she screamed in sudden frenzy, and Conan caught her hands, fearing that she would harm herself. “He told me what he was going to do to me!” she panted. “Kill me! Kill me with your sword before he bursts the door!”

Conan looked at her, and shook his head.

“I’ll do what I can,” he said. “That won’t be much, but it’ll give you a chance to get past him down the stair. Then run for the cliffs. I have a boat tied at the foot of the steps. If you can get out of the palace you may escape him yet. The people of this city are all asleep.”

She dropped her head in her hands. Conan took up his simitar and moved over to stand before the echoing door. One watching him would not have realized that he was waiting for a death he regarded as inevitable. His eyes smoldered more vividly; his muscular hand knotted harder on 316

his hilt; that was all.

The hinges had given under the giant's terrible assault and the door rocked crazily, held only by the bolts. And these solid steel bars were buckling, bending, bulging out of their sockets.

Conan watched in an almost impersonal fascination, envying the monster his inhuman strength.

Then without warning the bombardment ceased. In the stillness Conan heard other noises on the landing outside – the beat of wings, and a muttering voice that was like the whining of wind through midnight branches. Then presently there was silence, but there was a new *feel* in the air. Only the whetted instincts of barbarism could have sensed it, but Conan knew, without seeing or hearing him leave, that the master of Dagon no longer stood outside the door.

He glared through a crack that had been started in the steel of the portal. The landing was empty. He drew the warped bolts and cautiously pulled aside the sagging door. Khosatral was not on the stair, but far below he heard the clang of a metal door. He did not know whether the giant was plotting new deviltries or had been summoned away by that muttering voice, but he wasted no time in conjectures.

He called to Octavia, and the new note in his voice brought her up to her feet and to his side almost without her conscious volition.

"What is it?" she gasped.

"Don't stop to talk!" He caught her wrist. "Come on!" The chance for action had transformed him; his eyes blazed, his voice crackled. "The knife!" he muttered, while almost dragging the girl down the stair in his fierce haste. "The magic Yuetshi blade! He left it in the dome! I –" his voice died suddenly as a clear mental picture sprang up before him. That dome adjoined the great room where stood the copper throne – sweat started out on his body. The only way to that dome was through that room with its copper throne and the foul thing that slumbered in it.

But he did not hesitate. Swiftly they descended the stair, crossed the chamber, descended the next stair, and came into the great dim hall with its mysterious hangings. They had seen no sign of the colossus. Halting before the great bronze-valved door, Conan caught Octavia by her shoulders and shook her in his intensity.

“Listen!” he snapped. “I’m going into that room and fasten the door. Stand here and listen; if Khosatral comes, call to me. If you hear me cry out for you to go, run as though the devil were on your heels – which he probably will be. Make for that door at the other end of the hall, because I’ll be past helping you. I’m going for the Yuetshi knife!”

Before she could voice the protest her lips were framing, he had slid through the valves and 317

shut them behind him. He lowered the bolt cautiously, not noticing that it could be worked from the outside. In the dim twilight his gaze sought that grim copper throne; yes, the scaly brute was still there, filling the throne with its loathsome coils. He saw a door behind the throne and knew that it led into the dome. But to reach it he must mount the dais, a few feet from the throne itself.

A wind blowing across the green floor would have made more noise than Conan’s slinking feet. Eyes glued on the sleeping reptile he reached the dais and mounted the glass steps. The snake had not moved. He was reaching for the door….

The bolt on the bronze portal clanged and Conan stifled an awful oath as he saw Octavia come into the room. She stared about, uncertain in the deeper gloom, and he stood frozen, not daring to shout a warning. Then she saw his shadowy figure and ran toward the dais, crying: “I want to go with you! I’m afraid to stay alone – *oh!”* She threw up her hands with a terrible scream as for the first time she saw the occupant of the throne. The wedge-shaped head had lifted from its coils and thrust out toward her on a yard of shining neck.

Then with a smooth flowing motion it began to ooze from the throne, coil by coil, its ugly head bobbing in the direction of the paralyzed girl.

Conan cleared the space between him and the throne with a desperate bound, his simitar swinging with all his power. And with such blinding speed did the serpent move that it whipped about and met him in full midair, lapping his limbs and body with half a dozen coils.

His half-checked stroke fell futilely as he crashed down on the dais, gashing the scaly trunk but not severing it.

Then he was writhing on the glass steps with fold after slimy fold knotting

about him, twisting, crushing, killing him. His right arm was still free, but he could get no purchase to strike a killing blow, and he knew one blow must suffice. With a groaning convulsion of muscular expansion that bulged his veins almost to bursting on his temples and tied his muscles in quivering, tortured knots, he heaved up on his feet, lifting almost the full weight of that forty-foot devil.

An instant he reeled on wide-braced legs, feeling his ribs caving in on his vitals and his sight growing dark, while his simitar gleamed above his head. Then it fell, shearing through the scales and flesh and vertebræ. And where there had been one huge writhing cable, now there were horribly two, lashing and flopping in the death throes. Conan staggered away from their blind strokes. He was sick and dizzy, and blood oozed from his nose. Groping in a dark mist he clutched Octavia and shook her until she gasped for breath.

“Next time I tell you to stay somewhere,” he gasped, “you stay!”

He was too dizzy even to know whether she replied. Taking her wrist like a truant schoolgirl, he led her around the hideous stumps that still looped and knotted on the floor. Somewhere, in the distance, he thought he heard men yelling, but his ears were still roaring so that he could not be sure.

The door gave to his efforts. If Khosatral had placed the snake there to guard the thing he feared, evidently he considered it ample precaution. Conan half expected some other monstrosity to leap at him with the opening of the door, but in the dimmer light he saw only the vague sweep of the arch above, a dully gleaming block of gold, and a half-moon glimmer on the stone.

With a gasp of gratification he scooped it up, and did not linger for further exploration. He turned and fled across the room and down the great hall toward the distant door that he felt led to the outer air. He was correct. A few minutes later he emerged into the silent streets, half carrying, half guiding his companion. There was no one to be seen, but beyond the western wall there sounded cries and moaning wails that made Octavia tremble. He led her to the southwestern wall, and without difficulty found a stone stair that mounted the rampart. He had appropriated a thick tapestry rope in the great hall, and now, having reached the parapet, he looped the soft strong cord about the girl’s hips and lowered her to the earth. Then, making one end fast to a merlon, he slid down after her. There was but one way of escape from the island

– the stair on the western cliffs. In that direction he hurried, swinging wide around the spot from which had come the cries and the sound of terrible blows.

Octavia sensed that grim peril lurked in those leafy fastnesses. Her breath came pantingly and she pressed close to her protector. But the forest was silent now, and they saw no shape of menace until they emerged from the trees and glimpsed a figure standing on the edge of the cliffs.

Jehungir Agha had escaped the doom that had overtaken his warriors when an iron giant sallied suddenly from the gate and battered and crushed them into bits of shredded flesh and splintered bone. When he saw the swords of his archers break on that man-like juggernaut, he had known it was no human foe they faced, and he had fled, hiding in the deep woods until the sounds of slaughter ceased. Then he crept back to the stair, but his boatmen were not waiting for him.

They had heard the screams, and presently, waiting nervously, had seen, on the cliff above them, a blood-smeared monster waving gigantic arms in awful triumph. They had waited for no more. When Jehungir came upon the cliffs they were just vanishing among the reeds beyond ear-shot. Khosatral was gone – had either returned to the city or was prowling the forest in search of the man who had escaped him outside the walls.

Jehungir was just preparing to descend the stairs and depart in Conan’s boat, when he saw the *hetman* and the girl emerge from the trees. The experience which had congealed his blood and almost blasted his reason had not altered Jehungir’s intentions toward the *kozak* chief. The sight of the man he had come to kill filled him with gratification. He was astonished to see the girl he had given to Jelal Khan, but he wasted no time on her. Lifting his bow he drew the shaft to its head and loosed. Conan crouched and the arrow splintered on a tree, and Conan laughed.

“Dog!” he taunted. “You can’t hit me! I was not born to die on Hyrkanian steel! Try again, pig of Turan!”

Jehungir did not try again. That was his last arrow. He drew his simitar and advanced, confident in his spired helmet and close-meshed mail. Conan met him half-way in a blinding whirl of swords. The curved blades ground

together, sprang apart, circled in glittering arcs that blurred the sight which tried to follow them. Octavia, watching, did not see the stroke, but she heard its chopping impact, and saw Jehungir fall, blood spurting from his side where the Cimmerian's steel had sundered his mail and bitten to his spine.

But Octavia's scream was not caused by the death of her former master. With a crash of bending boughs Khosatral Khel was upon them. The girl could not flee; a moaning cry escaped her as her knees gave way and pitched her grovelling to the sward.

Conan, stooping above the body of the Agha, made no move to escape. Shifting his reddened simitar to his left hand, he drew the great half-blade of the Yuetshi. Khosatral Khel was towering above him, his arms lifted like mauls, but as the blade caught the sheen of the sun, the giant gave back suddenly.

But Conan's blood was up. He rushed in, slashing with the crescent blade. And it did not splinter. Under its edge the dusky metal of Khosatral's body gave way like common flesh beneath a cleaver. From the deep gash flowed a strange ichor, and Khosatral cried out like the dirging of a great bell. His terrible arms flailed down, but Conan, quicker than the archers who had died beneath those awful flails, avoided their strokes and struck again and yet again.

Khosatral reeled and tottered; his cries were awful to hear, as if metal were given a tongue of pain, as if iron shrieked and bellowed under torment.

Then wheeling away he staggered into the forest; he reeled in his gait, crashed through bushes and caromed off trees. Yet though Conan followed him with the speed of hot passion, the walls and towers of Dagon loomed through the trees before the man came within dagger-reach of the giant.

Then Khosatral turned again, flailing the air with desperate blows, but Conan, fired to berserk fury, was not to be denied. As a panther strikes down a bull moose at bay, so he plunged under the bludgeoning arms and drove the crescent blade to the hilt under the spot where a human's heart would be.

Khosatral reeled and fell. In the shape of a man he reeled, but it was not the shape of a man that struck the loam. Where there had been the likeness of a

human face, there was no face at all, and the metal limbs melted and changed…. Conan, who had not shrunk from Khosatral living, recoiled blenching from Khosatral dead, for he had witnessed an awful transmutation; in his dying throes Khosatral Khel had become again the *thing* that had crawled up from the Abyss millenniums gone. Gagging with intolerable repugnance, Conan turned to flee the sight; and he was suddenly aware that the pinnacles of Dagon no longer glimmered through the trees. They had faded like smoke – the battlements, the crenellated towers, the great bronze gates, the velvets, the gold, the ivory, and the dark-haired women, and the men with their shaven skulls.

With the passing of the inhuman intellect which had given them rebirth, they had faded back into the dust which they had been for ages uncounted. Only the stumps of broken columns rose above crumbling walls and broken paves and shattered dome. Conan again looked upon the ruins of Xapur as he remembered them.

The wild *hetman* stood like a statue for a space, dimly grasping something of the cosmic tragedy of the fitful ephemera called mankind and the hooded shapes of darkness which prey upon it. Then as he heard his name called in accents of fear, he started, as one awaking from a dream, glanced again at the thing on the ground, shuddered and turned away toward the cliffs and the girl that waited there.

She was peering fearfully under the trees, and she greeted him with a half-stifled cry of relief.

He had shaken off the dim monstrous visions which had momentarily haunted him, and was his exuberant self again.

“Where is *he?”* she shuddered.

“Gone back to hell whence he crawled,” he replied cheerfully. “Why didn’t you climb the stair and make your escape in my boat?”

“I wouldn’t desert –” she began, then changed her mind, and amended rather sulkily, “I have nowhere to go. The Hyrkanians would enslave me again, and the pirates would –”

“What of the *kozaks* ?” he suggested.

“Are they better than the pirates?” she asked scornfully. Conan’s admiration increased to see how well she had recovered her poise after having endured such frantic terror. Her arrogance amused him.

“You seemed to think so in the camp by Ghori,” he answered. “You were free enough with your smiles then.”

Her red lip curled in disdain. “Do you think I was enamored of you? Do you dream that I would have shamed myself before an ale-guzzling, meat-gorging barbarian unless I had to? My master – whose body lies there – forced me to do as I did.”

“Oh!” Conan seemed rather crestfallen. Then he laughed with undiminished zest. “No matter.

You belong to me now. Give me a kiss.”

“You dare ask –” she began angrily, when she felt herself snatched off her feet and crushed to the *hetman* ’s muscular breast. She fought him fiercely, with all the supple strength of her magnificent youth, but he only laughed exuberantly, drunk with the possession of this splendid creature writhing in his arms.

He crushed her struggles easily, drinking the nectar of her lips with all the unrestrained passion that was his, until the arms that strained against him melted and twined convulsively about his massive neck. Then he laughed down into the clear eyes, and said: “Why should not a chief of the Free People be preferable to a city-bred dog of Turan?”

She shook back her tawny locks, still tingling in every nerve from the fire of his kisses. She did not loosen her arms from his neck. “Do you deem yourself an Agha’s equal?” she challenged.

He laughed and strode with her in his arms toward the stair. “You shall judge,” he boasted. “I’ll burn Khawarizm for a torch to light your way to my tent.”

Miscellanea

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The Coming of Conan The Cimmerian

The Phoenix on the Sword

(First submitted draft)

The Phoenix on the Sword

(First submitted draft)

CHAPTER 1

“My songs are torches for a king’s pyre!”

“At midnight the king dies!”

The speaker was tall, dark and lean; a scar near his mouth added to his already sinister aspect.

His hearers nodded, their eyes grim. One of these was a short, fat, richly dressed man, with a weak petulant mouth and shifty eyes. Another was a sombre giant in gold-chased mail. The third was a tall wiry man in the garb of a jester, whose unruly yellow hair fell wildly above flaming blue eyes. The last was a dwarf with a cruel aristocratic face, whose abnormally broad shoulders and long arms contrasted strangely with his stunted figure.

The first speaker glanced unconsciously at the close-barred doors and velvet-hung windows, and smiled bleakly. “Let us take the oath of the Dagger and the Flame. I trust you of course.

Still it is better that there be assurance of a sort for us all. I note tremors among some of you.”

“That is all very well for you to say, Ascalante,” broke in the fat man petulantly. “You are an outlaw, anyway, with a price on your head – you have all to gain and nothing to lose, whereas we –”

“– Have much to lose and more to gain,” answered the outlaw imperturbably. "You called me out of my desert fastnesses far to the south to aid you in overthrowing a king – well, I have made the plans, set the snare, baited the

trap and stand ready to take the prey – but I must be sure that I will not be left holding the bag. Will you swear?"

"Enough of this futile talk!" cried the man in jester's garb. "Aye, we will swear this dawn and 324

tonight we will dance down a king! 'Oh, the chant of the chariots, and the whir of the wings of the vultures – ' "

"Save your songs for another time, Rinaldo," laughed Ascalante. "This is a time for daggers, not rhymes."

"My songs are torches for a king's pyre!" cried the minstrel, whipping out a long dagger. "Ho, slaves, bring hither a candle! I shall be first to swear the oath."

A slave whose dusky skin revealed his Stygian blood, brought a long taper and Rinaldo pricked his own wrist, bringing blood. The others followed his example, then gripping hands in a sort of circle, with the lighted candle in the center, they allowed the drops of blood to trickle upon the flame. While it hissed and flickered, they repeated:

"I, Ascalante, a landless man, swear to the deed avowed and silence covenanted, by steel and flame and blood, and the Oath unbreakable."

"And I, Rinaldo, first minstrel of Aquilonia!" exclaimed the poet.

"And I, Volmana, count of Karaban," said the dwarf.

"And I, Gromel, commander of the Black Legion of Aquilonia," rumbled the giant.

"And I, Dion, baron of Attalus, rightful heir to Aquilonia's throne," quavered the fat man.

The candle went out, quenched by the falling blood-drops.

"So fades the life of our enemy," quoth Ascalante, releasing his companions' hands and regarding them with carefully veiled contempt. He had broken too many oaths himself to regard even this vow otherwise than cynically, but he knew that Dion, whom he trusted least, was superstitious. There was no

reason to overlook any safe-guard, no matter how slight.

“Tomorrow,” said Ascalante abruptly, “– I mean today, for it is dawn now – Count Trocero of Poitain, seneschal of the king, rides to Nemedia with Prospero, king Conan’s righthand man, with most of the Poitanian troops and a goodly number of those Black Dragons who form the king’s bodyguard. With the exception of the few squads of this regiment now in the palace, all the rest are at present patrolling the Pictish frontier – thanks to the increasing activities of the barbarians along the western border. Once Conan is dead the people will rise and welcome the new regime, and the king’s friends, hastening to avenge him, will find the city gates locked against them and the rest of the army – particularly the Black Legion – ready to defend the new dynasty – or rather the old dynasty restored.”

“Yes,” said Volmana with some satisfaction, “that was your plan, Ascalante, but without my aid you could not have accomplished it. I have kin high in the court of Nemedia, and it was a simple matter to have them subtly persuade king Numa to request the presence of Trocero.

And, since Conan honors the Count of Poitain above all others, he must have a large escort of royal troops, as well as his own retainers.”

The outlaw nodded.

“True. As I told you, I’ve at last managed, through Gromel, to corrupt a spendthrift officer of the Black Dragons. This man will march the guard away from the royal bed-chamber just before midnight, on one pretext or another. The various slaves who might be lurking about on duty or otherwise will also have been disposed of by him. We will be waiting with sixteen desperate rogues of mine whom I have summoned from the desert, and who now hide in various parts of the city. We will gain entrance to the palace through the secret tunnel known only to you, Volmana, and with the odds twenty to one –”

He laughed. Gromel nodded seriously; Volmana grinned bleakly; Dion turned pale and his breath sucked in. Rinaldo smote his hands together and cried out ringingly: “By Mitra, they will remember this night, who strike the golden strings! The fall of the tyrant, the death of the despot! – what songs I shall make!”

His eyes burned with a wild fanatical light, and the others regarded him dubiously, except Ascalante, who bent his head to hide a grin. Then the outlaw rose suddenly.

“Enough! The sun will soon be up, and you must not be seen leaving this place. Get back to your proper places, and not by word, deed or look do you reveal what is in your minds.” He hesitated, eying Dion. “Baron, your white face will betray you. If Conan comes to you and looks into your eyes with his searching gaze, you will collapse. Wait until the sun is well up –

so as not to cause suspicion by an early morning flight – then get you out to your country estate and there wait until we send for you. We four and my rogues can turn the trick tonight.”

Dion almost collapsed then from a reaction of joy; he left, shaking like a leaf and babbling incoherencies; the others nodded to the outlaw and departed.

Ascalante stretched himself like a great cat and grinned. He called for wine and it was brought him by the sombre Stygian slave.

“Tomorrow,” quoth Ascalante, taking the goblet, “I come into the open and let the people of Aquilonia feast their eyes upon me. For months now, ever since the Rebel Four summoned me from the desert, I have been cooped in like a rat – living in the very heart of my enemies in this obscure house of Dion’s, hiding away from the light in the daytime, skulking, masked through 326

dark alleys and darker corridors at night. Yet I have accomplished what those rebellious lords could not. Working through them and through other agents, many of whom have never seen my face, I have honeycombed the empire with discontent and unrest. I have bribed and corrupted officials, spread sedition among the people and mutiny among the regiments – in short, I, working in the shadows, have paved the downfall of the king who at this instant sits throned in the sun. By Mitra, I had almost forgotten that I was a statesman before I was an outlaw.”

“You work with strange tools,” commented the slave.

“Weak men but strong in their ways,” lazily answered the outlaw. “As for tools, they consider *me* that. Volmana – a shrewd man, bold and audacious, with kin in high places – but poverty-stricken and with his barren estates loaded with debts. Gromel – strong and ferocious as a lion, with considerable

power among the soldiery, but lacking in real brain-power. Dion, cunning in his low way, but otherwise a fool and a coward. His immense wealth has been essential to my schemes, however – in bribing officials and soldiers, and in smuggling strong drink across the borders to madden the Picts and make them ravage the frontiers. Rinaldo – a mad poet full of hare-brained visions and out-worn chivalry. A prime favorite with the people because of his songs which tear out their heart-strings. He is our best bid for popularity. Each of these men has some clay and some steel in him – I am the center of the web – the force which has welded together the steel in them. If I die tonight under Conan's sword, the conspiracy will crumble."

"Who mounts the throne, if you succeed?"

"Dion, of course – or so he thinks. He has a trace of royal blood in him. Conan makes a bad mistake in letting men live who still boast descent from the old dynasty.

"Volmana wishes to be reinstated in favor as he was under the old regime so that he may lift his estate and title to their former grandeur. Gromel, with all the stubbornness of his Bossonian blood, hates Pallantides, the commander of the Black Dragons, and thinks he himself should be general of all Aquilonia's armies. Rinaldo – bah! I despise the man and admire him at the same time. He is your true idealist. Alone of us all he has no personal ambition. He sees in Conan a red-handed, rough-footed barbarian who came out of the north to plunder a peaceful land. He thinks he sees barbarism triumphing over culture. He already idealizes the king Conan killed, forgetting the rogue's real nature, remembering only that he occasionally patronized the arts, and forgetting the evils under which the land groaned during his reign, and he is making the people forget. Already they openly sing 'The Lament for the King' in which Rinaldo lauds the saintly villain, and denounces Conan as 'that black-hearted savage from the abyss.' Conan laughs, but at the same time wonders why the people are turning against him."

"But why does Rinaldo hate Conan?"

"Because he is a poet. Poets always hate those in power. To them perfection is always just 327

behind the last corner or beyond the next. They escape the present in dreams of the past and the future. Rinaldo is a flaming torch of idealism and he sees himself as a hero, a stainless knight –

which after all he is! – rising to overthrow the tyrant and liberate the people."

"And you?"

Ascalante laughed and emptied the goblet. "Poets are dangerous because they believe what they sing – while they sing it. Well, I believe what I think, and I think Dion will not long press the throne. A few months ago I had lost all ambitions save to raid the caravans as long as I lived. Now – well, we'll see."

The slave shrugged his broad shoulders.

"There was a time," he said with unconcealed bitterness, "when I, too, had my ambitions, beside which yours seem tawdry indeed. To what a state I have come! My old-time peers and rivals would stare indeed could they see Thoth-amon of the Ring serving as the slave of an outlander, and an outlaw, at that; and aiding in the petty ambitions of barons and kings!"

"You laid your trust in magic and mummery," carelessly answered Ascalante, "I trust my wits and my sword."

"Wits and sword are as straws against the dark wisdom of the Night," growled the Stygian, his dark eyes flickering with menacing lights and shadows. "Had I not lost the Ring, our positions might be reversed."

"Be that as it may," answered the outlaw impatiently, "Ring or no Ring, you wear the stripes of my whip on your back, and are likely to continue to wear them."

"Be not so sure!" the fiendish hatred of the Stygian glittered for an instant redly in his eyes.

"Some way, some how, I will find the Ring again, and when I do, by the serpent-fangs of Set, you shall pay –"

The hot-tempered Aquilonian struck him heavily across the mouth with his open hand. Thoth reeled, blood starting from his lips.

"You grow over-bold, dog," growled the outlaw. "Have a care; I am still your master. If you have served me, I have protected you. Go upon the house-tops and shout that Ascalante is in the city plotting against the king – if you dare."

"I dare not," mumbled the slave, wiping the blood from his lips.

“No, you do not dare,” Ascalante grinned bleakly. “For if I die by your stealth or treachery, a hermit priest in the southern desert will know of it, and will break the seal to a manuscript I left in his hands. And when he reads what I wrote thereon, a word will be whispered in Stygia, and a wind will creep up from the south by midnight. And where will you hide your head, Thothamon?”

The slave shuddered and his dusky face went ashen.

“Enough!” Ascalante changed his tone peremptorily. “I have work for you. I do not trust Dion.

Ride after him, and if you do not overtake him on the road, proceed to his country estate and remain with him until we send for him. Don’t let him out of your sight. He is mazed with fear, and might bolt – might even rush to Conan in a panic and reveal the whole plot, hoping to thus save his own hide. Go!”

The slave bowed, hiding the hate in his eyes, and did as he was bidden. Ascalante turned again to his wine.

CHAPTER 2

When I was a fighting-man, the kettle-drums they beat,

The people scattered gold-dust before my horse’s feet;

But now I am a great king, the people hound my track

With poison in my wine-cup, and daggers at my back.

– *The Road of Kings.*

The room was large and ornate, with rich tapestries on the polished-panelled walls, deep carpets on the tiled floor, and with the lofty ceiling adorned with intricate carvings and scrollwork. Behind a gold-chased writing table sat a man whose broad shoulders and sun-browned skin seemed out of place among those luxuriant surroundings. He seemed more a part of the sun and winds and high places of the outlands. His slightest movement spoke of steel-

spring muscles knit to a keen brain with the co-ordination of a born fighting-man. There was nothing deliberate or measured about his movements. Either he was perfectly at rest – still as a bronze statue – or else he was in motion, not with the jerky quickness of over-tense nerves, but with a cat-like speed that blurred the sight which tried to follow him.

His garments were of rich fabric, but simple style. He wore no rings or ornaments, and his 329

square-cut black mane was confined merely by a cloth-of-silver band about his head.

Now he laid down the golden stylus with which he had been laboriously scrawling on papyrus, rested his chin on his fist, and fixed his smoldering blue eyes enviously on the man who stood before him. This person was occupied in his affairs at the moment, for he was taking up the laces of his gold-chased armor, and abstractedly whistling – a rather unconventional performance, considering that he was in the presence of a king.

“Prospero,” said the man at the table, “these matters of statecraft weary me as all the fighting I have done never did.”

“All part of the game, Conan,” answered the dark-eyed Poitanian. “You are king – you must play the part.”

“I wish I might ride with you to Nemedia,” said Conan enviously. “It seems ages since I had a horse between my knees – but Publius says that affairs in the city require my presence. Curse him!

“When I overthrew the old dynasty,” he continued, speaking with the easy familiarity which existed only between him and the Poitanian, “it was easy enough, though it seemed bitter hard at the time. Looking back now over the wild path I followed, all those days of toil, intrigue, slaughter and tribulation seem like a dream.

“I did not dream far enough, Prospero. When King Numedides lay dead at my feet and I tore the crown from his gory head and set it on my own, I had reached the ultimate border of my dreams. I prepared myself to take the crown, not to hold it. In the old free days all I wanted was a sharp sword and a straight path to my enemies. Now no paths are straight and my sword is useless.

“When I overthrew Numedides, *then* I was the Liberator – now they spit at my shadow. They have put a statue of Numedides in the temple of Mitra, and people go and wail before it, hailing him as a saintly monarch who was done to death by a red-handed barbarian – when I led her armies to victory as a mercenary, Aquilonia overlooked the fact that I was a foreigner – now she can not forgive me.

“Now in the temple of Mitra, there come to burn incense to Numedides’ memory, men whom his hangmen blinded and maimed, men whose sons died in his dungeons, whose wives and daughters were dragged into his seraglio. The fickle fools!”

“Rinaldo is largely responsible,” answered Prospero, drawing up his sword belt another notch.

“He sings songs that make men mad. Hang him in his jester’s garb to the highest tower in the 330

city. Let him make rhymes for the vultures.”

Conan shook his lion head. “No, Prospero, he’s beyond my reach. A great poet is greater than any king. His songs are mightier than my sceptre, for he has near ripped the heart from my breast when he chose to sing for me. I will die and be forgotten, but Rinaldo’s songs will live forever.

“No, Prospero,” the king continued, a sombre look of doubt shadowing his eyes, “there is something hidden – some undercurrent of which we are not aware. I sense it as in my youth I sensed the tiger hidden in the tall grass. There is a nameless unrest throughout the kingdom. I feel unseen snares about me. I am like a hunter who crouches by his small fire amid the forest and hears stealthy feet padding in the darkness, and almost sees the glimmer of burning eyes. If I could but come to grips with something tangible, that I could cleave with my sword! I tell you, it’s not by chance that the Picts have of late so fiercely assailed the frontiers, so that the Bossonians have called for aid to beat them back. I should have ridden with the troops.”

“Publius feared a plot to trap and slay you beyond the frontier,” replied Prospero, smoothing his silken surcoat over his shining mail, and admiring his tall lithe figure in a silver mirror.

“That’s why he urged you to remain in the city. Forget these doubts. They are

born of your barbarian instincts. Let the people snarl! The mercenaries are ours, and the Black Dragons, and every rogue in Poitain swears by you. Your only danger is assassination, and that's impossible, with men of the imperial troops guarding you day and night. What are you working at there?"

"A map," answered Conan with pride. "The maps of the court show well the countries of the south, east and west, but in the north they are vague and faulty. I have copied my map from the best of the lot, and am adding the northern countries myself."

"By Mitra," said Prospero, "those lands are known to few. All know that east of Aquilonia lies Nemedia, then Brythunia, then Zamora; south lies Koth and the lands of Shem; west, beyond the Bossonian marches stretches the Pictish wilderness; beyond the northern Bossonian marches lies Cimmeria. Who knows what lies beyond that country?"

"I know," answered the king, "and am setting down my knowledge on this map. Here is Cimmeria, where I was born. Here –"

"Asgard and Vanaheim," Prospero scanned the map. "By Mitra, I had almost believed those lands to be fabulous."

Conan grinned and involuntarily touched the various scars on his dark face. "By Mitra, had you spent your youth on the northern frontier of Cimmeria, you had known otherwise! Asgard lies to the north, and Vanaheim to the northwest of Cimmeria, and there is continual war along the 331

borders. The western part of Vanaheim lies along the shores of the western sea, and east of Asgard is the country of the Hyperboreans, who are civilized and dwell in cities. East beyond their country are the deserts of the Hyrkanians."

"What manner of men are these northern folk?" asked Prospero curiously.

"Tall and fair and blue-eyed, and of like blood and language, save that the Æsir have yellow hair and the Vanir, red hair. Their chief god is Ymir, the frost-giant, and they own no over-lord, but each tribe has its king. They are wild and wayward and fierce. They fight all day and drink ale and roar their wild songs all night."

"Then I think you are more like them than you are like your own race,"

laughed Prospero.

“You laugh greatly, drink deep and bellow good songs, whereas I never saw another Cimmerian who drank aught but water, or who ever laughed, or ever sang save to chant dismal dirges.”

“Perhaps it’s the land they live in,” answered Conan. “A gloomier land never existed on earth.

It is all of hills, heavily wooded, and the trees are strangely dusky, so that even by day all the land looks dark and menacing. As far as a man may see his eye rests on the endless vistas of hills beyond hills, growing darker and darker in the distance. Clouds hang always among those hills; the skies are nearly always gray. Winds blow sharp and cold, driving rain or sleet or snow before them, and moan drearily among the passes and down the valleys. There is little mirth in that land.”

“Little wonder men grow moody there,” quoth Prospero with a shrug of his shoulders, thinking of the smiling sun-washed plains and blue lazy rivers of Poitain, Aquilonia’s southern-most province.

“Strange and moody, indeed,” answered Conan. “Life seems bitter and hard and futile. The men of those dark hills brood overmuch on unknown things. They dream monstrous dreams.

Their gods are Crom and his dark race, and they believe the world of the dead is a cold, sunless place of everlasting mist, where wandering ghosts go wailing forevermore. They have no hope here or hereafter, and they brood too much on the emptiness of life. I have seen the strange madness of futility fall upon them when a little thing like a spinning dust-cloud, or the hollow crying of a bird, or the moan of the wind through bare branches brought to their gloomy minds the emptiness of life and the vainness of existence. Only in war are the Cimmerians happy.

Mitra! The ways of the Æsir were more to my liking.”

“Well,” grinned Prospero, “the dark hills of Cimmeria are far behind you. And now I go. I’ll quaff a goblet of white Nemedian wine for you at Numa’s court.”

“Good,” grunted the king, “but kiss Numa’s dancing girls for yourself only, lest you involve the states!”

His gusty laughter followed Prospero out of the chamber. The carven door closed behind the Poitanian, and Conan turned back to his task. He paused a moment, idly listening to his friend’s retreating footsteps, which fell hollowly on the tiles. And as if the empty sound struck a kindred chord in his soul, a rush of revulsion swept over him. His mirth fell away from him like a mask, and his face was suddenly old, his eyes worn. The unreasoning melancholy of the Cimmerian fell like a shroud about his soul, paralyzing him with a crushing sense of the futility of human endeavor and the meaninglessness of life. His kingship, his pleasures, his fears, his ambitions, and all earthly things were revealed to him suddenly as dust and broken toys. The borders of life shrivelled and the lines of existence closed in about him, numbing him.

Dropping his lion head in his mighty hands, he groaned aloud.

Then lifting his head, as a man looks for escape, his eyes fell on a crystal jar of yellow wine.

Quickly he rose and pouring a goblet full, quaffed it at a gulp. Again he filled and emptied the goblet, and again. When he set it down, a fine warmth stole through his veins. Things and happenings assumed new values. The dark Cimmerian hills faded far behind him. Life was good and real and vibrant after all – not the dream of an idiot god. He stretched himself lazily like a gigantic cat and seated himself at the table, conscious of the magnitude and vital importance of himself and his task. Contentedly, he nibbled his stylus and eyed his map.

“South of Hyperborea lies Brythunia,” he murmured aloud. Selecting a broad blank space far enough out on the Hyrkanian desert to baffle inquisitive explorers, he wrote laboriously, “Here be dragons.” Then leaning back he surveyed his work with childish pride.

CHAPTER 3

Under the caverned pyramids great Set coils asleep;

Among the shadows of the tombs his dusky people creep.

I speak the Word from the hidden gulfs that never knew the sun -

Send me a servant for my hate, oh scaled and shining One!

The sun was setting, etching the green and hazy blue of the forest in brief gold. The waning beams glinted on the thick golden chain which Dion of Attalus twisted continually in his pudgy hand as he sat in the flaming riot of blossoms and flower-trees which was his garden. He shifted his fat body on his marble seat and glanced furtively about him, as if in quest of a lurking enemy. He sat within a circular grove of slender trees, whose interlapping branches cast 333

a thick shade over him. Near at hand a fountain tinkled silverly and other, unseen fountains in various parts of the great garden whispered an everlasting symphony.

Dion was alone except for the great dusky figure which lounged on a marble bench close at hand, watching the baron with deep, sombre eyes. Dion gave little thought to Thoth-amon. He vaguely knew that he was a slave in whom Ascalante reposed much trust, but like so many rich men, Dion paid scant heed to men below his own station in life.

“You need not be so nervous,” said Thoth. “The plot can not fail.”

“Ascalante can make mistakes as well as another,” snapped Dion, sweating at the mere thought of failure.

“Not he,” grinned the Stygian savagely, “else I had not been his slave, but his master.”

“What talk is this?” peevishly returned Dion, with only half a mind on the conversation.

Thoth-amon’s eyes narrowed. For all his iron self-control, he was near bursting with long pent-up shame, hate and rage; ready to take any sort of a desperate chance. What he did not reckon on, was the fact that Dion saw him, not as a human being with a brain and a wit, but simply as a slave, and therefore as a creature beneath notice.

“Listen to me,” said Thoth. “You will be king. But you little know the mind of Ascalante. I can help you. If you will protect me when you come to power, I will aid you. You can not trust Ascalante, once Conan is slain.

“Listen, my lord. I was a great sorcerer in the south. Men spoke of Thoth-amon as they spoke of Rammon. King Ctesphon of Stygia gave me great

honor, and cast down the magicians from the high places to exalt me in their stead. They hated me, but they feared me, for I controlled beings from *outside* which came at my call and did my bidding. By Set, mine enemy knew not the hour when he might awake at midnight to feel the taloned fingers of a nameless horror at his throat! Aye, I did dark and terrible magic with the Serpent Ring of Set, which I found in a nighted tomb a league beneath the earth, forgotten before the first man crawled out of the slimy sea.

"But a thief stole the Ring and my power was broken. The magicians rose up to slay me, and I fled. Disguised as a camel-driver, I was travelling in a caravan in the land of Koth, when Ascalante's reavers fell upon us. All in the caravan were slain except myself, and I saved my life by revealing my identity to Ascalante, and swearing to serve him as a slave. Bitter has been that bondage!

"To hold me fast, he wrote of me in a manuscript, and sealed it and gave it into the hands of a hermit who dwells on the southern borders of Koth. I dare not strike a dagger into him while he sleeps, or betray him to his enemies, for then the hermit would open the manuscript and read –

thus Ascalante instructed him. And he would speak a word in Stygia –"

Again Thoth shuddered and an ashen hue tinged his dusky skin.

"Men know me not in Aquilonia," he said. "But should my enemies in Stygia learn my whereabouts, not the width of half a world between us would suffice to save me from such a doom as would blast the soul of a bronze statue. Only a king with castles and hosts of swordsmen could protect me. So I have told you my secret, and urge that you make a pact with me. I can aid you with my wisdom, and you can protect me. And some day I will find the Ring

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"Ring? Ring?" Thoth had underestimated the man's utter egoism. Dion had not even been listening to the slave's words, so completely engrossed was he in his own thoughts, but the final word stirred a ripple in his self-centeredness.

"Ring?" he repeated. "That makes me remember – my ring of good fortune. I

had it from a Shemitish thief who swore he stole it from a wizard far to the south, and that it would bring me luck. I paid him enough, Mitra knows. By the gods, I need all the luck I can have, what with Volmana and Ascalante dragging me into their bloody plots – I'll see to the ring."

Thoth sprang up, blood mounting darkly to his face, while his eyes flamed with the stunned fury of a man who suddenly realizes the full depths of a fool's swinish stupidity. Dion never heeded him. Lifting a secret lid in the marble seat, he fumbled for a moment among a heap of gewgaws of various kinds – barbaric charms, bits of bones, pieces of tawdry jewelry – luck-pieces and conjures which the man's superstitious nature had prompted him to collect.

"Ah, here it is!" He triumphantly lifted a ring of curious make. It was of a metal like copper, and was made in the form of a scaled serpent, coiled in three loops, with its tail in its mouth. Its eyes were yellow gems which glittered balefully. Thoth-amon cried out as if he had been struck, and Dion wheeled and gaped, his face suddenly bloodless. The slave's eyes were blazing, his mouth wide, his huge dusky hands outstretched like talons.

"The Ring! By Set! The Ring!" he shrieked. "My Ring – stolen from me –"

Steel glittered in the Stygian's hand and with a heave of his great dusky shoulders he drove the dagger into the baron's fat body. Dion's high thin squeal broke in a strangled gurgle and his whole flabby frame collapsed like melted butter. A fool to the end, he died in mad terror, not knowing why. Flinging aside the crumpled corpse, already forgetful of it, Thoth grasped the

ring in both hands, his dark eyes blazing with a fearful avidness.

"My Ring!" he whispered in terrible exultation. "My power!"

How long he crouched over the baleful thing, motionless as a statue, drinking the evil aura of it into his dark soul, not even the Stygian knew. When he shook himself from his revery and drew back his mind from the nighted abysses where it had been questing, the moon was rising, casting long shadows across the smooth marble back of the garden-seat, at the foot of which sprawled the darker shadow which had been the lord of Attalus.

"No more, Ascalante, no more!" whispered the Stygian, and his eyes burned

red as a vampire's in the gloom. Stooping, he cupped a handful of congealing blood from the sluggish pool in which his victim sprawled, and rubbed it in the copper serpent's eyes until the yellow sparks were covered by a crimson mask.

"Blind your eyes, mystic serpent," he chanted in a blood-freezing whisper. "Blind your eyes to the moonlight and open them on darker gulfs! What do you see, oh serpent of Set? Whom do you call from the gulfs of the Night? Whose shadow falls on the waning Light? Call him to me, oh serpent of Set!"

Stroking the scales with a peculiar circular motion of his fingers, a motion which always carried the fingers back to their starting place, his voice sank still lower as he whispered dark names and grisly incantations forgotten the world over save in the grim hinterlands of dark Stygia, where monstrous shapes move in the dusk of the tombs.

There was a movement in the air about him, such a swirl as is made in water when some creature rises to the surface. A nameless, freezing wind blew on him briefly, as if from an opened Door. Thoth felt a presence at his back, but he did not look about. He kept his eyes fixed on the moonlit space of marble, on which a tenuous shadow hovered. As he continued his whispered incantations, this shadow grew in size and clarity, until it stood out distinct and horrific. Its outline was not unlike that of a gigantic baboon, but no such baboon ever walked the earth, not even in Stygia. Still Thoth did not look, but drawing from his girdle a sandal of his master – always carried in the dim hope that he might be able to put it to such use – he cast it behind him.

"Know it well, slave of the Ring!" he exclaimed. "Find him who wore it and destroy him! Look into his eyes and blast his soul, before you tear out his throat! Kill him! Aye," in a blind burst of passion, "and all with him!"

Etched on the moonlit wall Thoth saw the horror lower its misshapen head and take the scent like some hideous hound. Then the grisly head was thrown back and the thing wheeled and was 336

gone like a wind through the trees. The Stygian flung up his arms in maddened exultation, and his teeth and eyes gleamed in the moonlight.

A soldier on guard without the walls yelled in startled horror as a great loping black shadow with flaming eyes cleared the wall and swept by him with a swirling rush of wind. But it was gone so swiftly that the bewildered warrior

was left wondering whether it had been a dream or a hallucination.

CHAPTER 4

When the world was young and men were weak, and the fiends

of the night walked free,

I strove with Set by fire and steel and the juice of the upas-tree; Now that I sleep in the mount's black heart, and the ages take their toll, Forget ye him who fought with the Snake to save the human soul?

Alone in the great sleeping-chamber with its high golden dome King Conan slumbered and dreamed. Through swirling gray mists he heard a curious call, faint and far, and though he did not understand it, it seemed not within his power to ignore it. Sword in hand he went through the gray mist, as a man might walk through clouds, and the voice grew more distinct as he proceeded until he understood the word it spoke – it was his own name that was being called across the gulfs of Space or Time.

Now the mists grew lighter and he saw that he was in a great dark corridor that seemed to be cut in solid black stone. It was unlighted, but by some magic he could see plainly. The floor, ceiling and walls were highly polished and gleamed dully, and they were carved with the figures of ancient heroes and half-forgotten gods. He shuddered to see the vast shadowy outlines of the Nameless Old Ones, and he knew somehow that mortal feet had not traversed the corridor for centuries.

He came upon a wide stair carved in the solid rock, and the sides of the shaft were adorned with esoteric symbols so ancient and horrific that King Conan's skin crawled. The steps were carven each with the abhorrent figure of the Old Serpent, Set, so that at each step he planted his heel on the head of the Snake, as it was intended from old times. But he was none the less at ease for all that.

But the voice called him on, and at last, in darkness that would have been impenetrable to his material eyes, he came into a strange crypt, and saw a vague white-bearded figure sitting on a tomb. Conan's hair rose up and he grasped his sword, but the figure spoke in sepulchral tones.

“Oh man, do you know me?”

“Not I, by Crom!” swore the king.

“Man,” said the ancient, “I am Epemitreus.”

“But Epemitreus the Sage has been dead for fifteen hundred years!” stammered Conan.

“Harken!” spoke the other commandingly. “As a pebble cast into a dark lake sends ripples to the further shores, happenings in the Unseen World have broken like waves on my slumber. I have marked you well, Conan of Cimmeria, and the stamp of mighty happenings and great deeds is upon you. But dooms are loose in the land, against which your sword can not aid you.”

“You speak in riddles,” said Conan uneasily. “Let me see my foe and I’ll cleave his skull to the teeth.”

“Loose your barbarian fury against your foes of flesh and blood,” answered the ancient. “It is not against men I must shield you. There are dark worlds barely guessed by man, wherein formless monsters stalk – fiends which may be drawn from the Outer Voids to take material shape and rend and devour at the bidding of evil magicians. There is a serpent in your house, oh king – an adder in your kingdom, come up from Stygia, with the dark wisdom of the shadows in his murky soul. As a sleeping man dreams of the serpent which crawls near him, I have felt the foul presence of Set’s neophyte. He is drunk with terrible power, and the blows he strikes at his enemy may well bring down the kingdom. I have called you to me, to give you a weapon against him and his hell-hound pack.”

“But why?” bewilderedly asked Conan. “Men say you sleep in the black heart of Golamira, whence you send forth your ghost on unseen wings to aid Aquilonia in times of need, but I – I am an outlander and a barbarian.”

“Peace!” the ghostly tones reverberated through the great shadowy cavern. “Your destiny is one with Aquilonia. Gigantic happenings are forming in the web and the womb of Fate, and a blood-mad sorcerer shall not stand in the path of imperial destiny. Ages ago Set coiled about the world like a python about its prey. All my life, which was as the lives of three common men, I fought him. I drove him into the shadows of the mysterious south, but in dark Stygia men still worship him who to us is the arch-demon. As I fought Set, I fight his worshippers and his votaries and his acolytes. Hold out your sword.”

Wondering, Conan did so, and on the great blade, close to the heavy silver guard, the ancient traced with a bony finger a strange symbol that glowed like white fire in the shadows. And on the instant crypt, tomb and ancient vanished, and Conan, bewildered, sprang from his couch in the great golden-domed chamber. And as he stood, bewildered at the strangeness of his dream, he realized that he was gripping his sword in his hand. And his hair prickled at the nape of his neck, for on the broad blade was carven a symbol – the outline of a phœnix. And he remembered that on the tomb in the crypt he had seen what he had thought to be a similar figure, carven of stone. Now he wondered if it had been but a stone figure, and his skin crawled at the strangeness of it all.

Then as he stood, a stealthy sound in the corridor outside brought him to life, and without stopping to investigate, he began to don his armor; again he was the barbarian, suspicious and alert as a gray wolf at bay.

CHAPTER 5

What do I know of cultured ways, the gilt, the craft and the lie?

I, who was born in a naked land and bred in the open sky.

The subtle tongue, the sophist guile, they fail when the broadswords sing;
Rush in and die, dogs – I was a man before I was a king.

– The Road of Kings.

Through the silence which shrouded the corridor of the royal palace stole twenty furtive figures. Their stealthy feet, bare or cased in soft leather, made no sound either on thick carpet or bare marble tile. The torches which stood in niches along the halls gleamed red on dagger, sword and keen-edged ax.

“Easy all!” hissed Ascalante. “Stop that cursed loud breathing, whoever it is! The officer of the night-guard has removed most of the sentries from these halls and made the rest drunk, but we must be careful, just the same. Back! Here come the guard!”

They crowded back behind a cluster of carven pillars, and almost immediately ten giants in black armor swung by at a measured pace. Their faces showed

doubt as they glanced at the officer who was leading them away from their post of duty. This officer was rather pale; as the guard passed the hiding-places of the conspirators, he was seen to wipe the sweat from his brow with a shaky hand. He was young, and this betrayal of a king did not come easy to him.

He mentally cursed the vain-glorious extravagance which had put him in debt to the moneylenders and made him a pawn of scheming politicians.

The guardsmen clanked by and disappeared up the corridor.

“Good!” grinned Ascalante. “Conan sleeps unguarded. Haste! If they catch us killing him, we’re undone – but few men will espouse the cause of a dead king.”

“Aye, haste!” cried Rinaldo, his blue eyes matching the gleam of the sword he swung above his head. “My blade is thirsty! I hear the gathering of the vultures! On!”

They hurried down the corridor with reckless speed and stopped before a gilded door which bore the royal dragon symbol of Aquilonia.

“Gromel!” snapped Ascalante. “Break me this door open!”

The giant drew a deep breath and launched his mighty frame against the panels, which groaned and bent at the impact. Again he crouched and plunged. With a snapping of bolts and a rending crash of wood, the door splintered and burst inward.

“In!” roared Ascalante, on fire with the spirit of the deed.

“In!” yelled Rinaldo. “Death to the tyrant!”

They stopped short. Conan faced them, not a naked man roused mazed and unarmed out of deep sleep to be butchered like a sheep, but a barbarian wide-awake and at bay, partly armored, and with his long sword in his hand.

For an instant the tableau held – the four rebel noblemen in the broken door, and the horde of wild hairy faces crowding behind them – all held

momentarily frozen by the sight of the blazing-eyed giant standing sword in hand in the middle of the candle-lighted chamber. In that instant Ascalante beheld, on a small table near the royal couch, the silver scepter and the slender gold circlet which was the crown of Aquilonia, and the sight maddened him with desire.

“In, rogues!” yelled the outlaw. “He is one to twenty and he has no helmet!”

True; there had been lack of time to don the heavy plumed casque, or to lace in place the side-plates of the cuirass, nor was there now time to snatch the great shield from the wall. Still, Conan was better protected than any of his foes except Volmana and Gromel, who were in full armor.

The king glared, puzzled as to their identity. Ascalante he did not know; he could not see through the closed vizors of the armored conspirators, and Rinaldo had pulled his slouch cap down above his eyes. But there was no time for surmise. With a yell that rang to the roof, the killers flooded into the room, Gromel first. He came like a charging bull, head down, sword low for the disembowelling thrust. Conan sprang to meet him, and all his tigerish strength went into the arm that swung the sword. In a whistling arc the great blade flashed through the air and crashed on the Bossonian’s helmet. Blade and casque shivered together and Gromel rolled lifeless on the floor. Conan bounded back, still gripping the broken hilt.

“Gromel!” he spat, his eyes blazing in amazement, as the shattered helmet disclosed the shattered head; then the rest of the pack were upon him. A dagger point raked along his ribs between breastplate and backplate, a sword-edge flashed before his eyes. He flung aside the dagger-wielder with his left arm, and smashed his broken hilt like a cestus into the swordsman’s temple. The man’s brains spattered in his face.

“Watch the door, five of you!” screamed Ascalante, dancing about the edge of the singing steel whirlpool, for he feared that Conan might smash through their midst and escape. The rogues drew back momentarily, as their leader seized several and thrust them toward the single door, and in that brief respite Conan leaped to the wall and tore therefrom an ancient battle-ax which, untouched by time, had hung there for half a century.

With his back to the wall he faced the closing ring for a flashing instant, then

leaped into the thick of them. He was no defensive fighter; even in the teeth of overwhelming odds he always carried the war to the enemy. Any other man would have already died there, and Conan himself did not hope to survive, but he did ferociously wish to inflict as much damage as he could before he fell. His barbaric soul was ablaze, and the chants of old heroes were singing in his ears.

As he sprang from the wall his ax dropped an outlaw with a severed shoulder, and the terrible back-hand return crushed the skull of another. Swords whined venomously about him, but death passed him by breathless margins. The Cimmerian moved in a blur of blinding speed. He was like a tiger among baboons as he leaped, side-stepped and spun, offering an ever-moving target, while his ax wove a shining wheel of death about him.

For a brief space the assassins crowded him fiercely, raining blows blindly and hampered by their own numbers; then they gave back suddenly – two corpses on the floor gave mute evidence of the king's fury, though Conan himself was bleeding from wounds on arm, neck and legs.

"Knaves!" screamed Rinaldo, dashing off his feathered cap, his wild eyes glaring. "Do ye shrink from the combat? Shall the despot live? Out on it!"

He rushed in, hacking madly, but Conan, recognizing him, shattered his sword with a short terrific chop and with a powerful push of his open hand sent him reeling to the floor. The king took Ascalante's point in his left arm, and the outlaw barely saved his life by ducking and springing backward from the swinging ax. Again the wolves swirled in and Conan's ax sang and crushed. A hairy rascal stooped beneath its stroke and dived at the king's legs, but after wrestling for a brief instant at what seemed a solid iron tower, glanced up in time to see the ax falling, but not in time to avoid it. In the interim one of his comrades lifted a broadsword with both hands and hewed through the king's left shoulder-plate, wounding the shoulder beneath.

In an instant Conan's cuirass was full of blood.

Volmana, flinging the attackers right and left in his savage impatience, came plowing through and hacked murderously at Conan's unprotected head. The king ducked deeply and the sword shaved off a lock of his black hair as it whistled above him. Conan pivoted on his heel and struck in from the side.

The ax crunched through the steel cuirass and Volmana crumpled with his whole left side caved in.

“Volmana!” gasped Conan breathlessly. “I’ll know that dwarf in Hell –”

He straightened to meet the maddened rush of Rinaldo, who charged in wild and wide open, armed only with a dagger. Conan leaped back, lifting his ax.

“Rinaldo!” his voice was strident with desperate urgency. “Back! I would not slay you –”

“Die, tyrant!” screamed the mad minstrel, hurling himself headlong on the king. Conan delayed the blow he was loth to deliver, until it was too late. Only when he felt the bite of the steel in his unprotected side did he strike, in a frenzy of blind desperation.

Rinaldo dropped with his skull shattered, and Conan reeled back against the wall, blood spurting from between the fingers which gripped his wound.

“In, now, and slay him!” yelled Ascalante.

Conan put his back against the wall and lifted his ax. He stood like an image of the unconquerable primordial – legs braced far apart, head thrust forward, one hand clutching the wall for support, the other gripping the ax on high, with the great corded muscles standing out in iron ridges, and his features frozen in a death snarl of fury – his eyes blazing terribly through the mist of blood which veiled them. The men faltered – wild, criminal and dissolute though they were, yet they came of a breed men called civilized, with a civilized background; here was the barbarian – the natural killer. They shrank back – the dying tiger could still deal death.

Conan sensed their uncertainty and grinned mirthlessly and ferociously.

“Who dies first?” he mumbled through smashed and bloody lips.

Ascalante leaped like a wolf, halted almost in midair with incredible quickness and fell prostrate to avoid the death which was hissing toward him. He frantically whirled his feet out of the way and rolled clear as Conan recovered from his missed blow and struck again. This time the ax sank

inches deep into the polished floor close to Ascalante's revolving legs.

Another misguided desperado chose this instant to charge, followed half-heartedly by his fellows. He intended killing Conan before the Cimmerian could wrench his ax from the floor, but his judgment was faulty. The red ax lurched up and crashed down and a crimson caricature of a man catapulted back against the legs of the attackers.

At that instant a fearful scream burst from the rogues at the door as a black misshapen shadow fell across the wall. All but Ascalante wheeled at that cry, and then, howling like dogs, they burst blindly through the door in a raving, blaspheming mob, and scattered through the corridors in screaming flight.

Ascalante did not look toward the door; he had eyes only for the wounded king. He supposed that the noise of the fray had at last roused the palace, and that the loyal guards were upon him, though even in that moment it seemed strange that his hardened rogues should scream so terribly in their flight. Conan did not look toward the door because he was watching the outlaw with the burning eyes of a dying wolf. In this extremity Ascalante's cynical philosophy did not desert him.

"All seems to be lost, particularly honor," he murmured.

"However, the king is dying on his feet – and –" Whatever other cogitation might have passed through his mind is not to be known; for, leaving the sentence uncompleted, he ran lightly at Conan just as the Cimmerian was perforce employing his ax-arm to wipe the blood from his blinded eyes.

But even as he began his charge, there was a strange rushing in the air and a heavy weight struck terrifically between his shoulders. He was dashed headlong and great talons sank agonizingly in his flesh. Writhing desperately beneath his attacker, he twisted his head about and stared into the face of Nightmare and lunacy. Upon him crouched a great black thing which he knew was born in no sane or human world. Its slavering black fangs were near his throat and the glare of its yellow eyes shrivelled his limbs as a killing wind shrivels young corn.

The hideousness of its face transcended mere bestiality. It might have been the face of an 343

ancient, evil mummy, quickened with demoniac life. In those abhorrent

features the outlaw's dilated eyes seemed to see, like a shadow in the madness that enveloped him, a faint and terrible resemblance to the slave Thoth-amon. Then Ascalante's cynical and all-sufficient philosophy deserted him, and with a ghastly cry he gave up the ghost before those slavering fangs touched him.

Conan, shaking the blood-drops from his eyes, stared frozen. At first he thought it was a great black hound which stood above Ascalante's distorted body; then as his sight cleared he saw that it was neither a hound nor a baboon.

With a cry that was like an echo of Ascalante's death-shriek, he reeled away from the wall and met the leaping horror with a cast of his ax that had behind it all the desperate power of his electrified nerves. The flying weapon glanced singing from the slanting skull it should have crushed, and the king was hurled half-way across the chamber by the impact of the giant body.

The slavering jaws closed on the arm Conan flung up to guard his throat, but the monster made no effort to secure a death-grip. Over his mangled arm it glared fiendishly into the king's eyes, in which there began to be mirrored a likeness of the horror which stared from the dead eyes of Ascalante. Conan felt his soul shrivel and begin to be drawn out of his body, to drown in the yellow wells of cosmic horror which glimmered spectrally in the formless chaos that was growing about him and engulfing all life and sanity. Those eyes grew and became gigantic, and in them the Cimmerian glimpsed the reality of all the abysmal and blasphemous horrors that lurk in the outer darkness of formless voids and nighted gulfs. He opened his bloody lips to shriek his hate and loathing, but only a dry rattle burst from his throat.

But the horror that paralyzed and destroyed Ascalante roused in the Cimmerian a frenzied fury akin to madness. With a volcanic wrench of his whole body he plunged backward, heedless of the agony of his torn arm, dragging the monster bodily with him. And his outflung hand struck something his dazed fighting-brain recognized as the hilt of his broken sword. Instinctively he gripped it and struck with all the power of nerve and thew, as a man stabs with a dagger. The broken blade sank deep and Conan's arm was released as the abhorrent mouth gaped as in agony. The king was hurled violently aside, and lifting himself on one hand he saw, as one mazed, the terrible convulsions of the monster from which thick blood was gushing through the great wound his broken blade had torn. And as he watched, its struggles ceased and it lay jerking spasmodically, staring upward with its grisly dead eyes. Conan blinked and shook the blood from his own eyes; it seemed to him that the thing was melting and disintegrating into a slimy

unstable mass.

Then a medley of voices reached his ears, and the room was thronged with the finally roused people of the court – knights, peers, ladies, men-at-arms, councillors – all babbling and shouting and getting in one another's way. The Black Dragons were on hand, wild with rage, swearing and ruffling, with their hands on their hilts and foreign oaths in their teeth. Of the 344

young officer of the door-guard nothing was seen, nor was he found then or later, though earnestly sought after.

"Gromel! Volmana! Rinaldo!" exclaimed Publius, the high councillor, wringing his fat hands among the corpses. "Black treachery! Some one shall dance for this! Call the guard."

"The guard is here, you old fool!" cavalierly snapped Pallantides, commander of the Black Dragons, forgetting Publius' rank in the stress of the moment. "Best stop your caterwauling and aid us to bind the king's wounds. He's like to bleed to death."

"Yes, yes!" cried Publius, who was a man of plans rather than action. "We must bind his wounds. Send for every leech of the court! Oh, my lord, what a black shame on the city! Are you entirely slain?"

"Wine!" gasped the king from the couch where they had laid him. They put a goblet to his bloody lips and he drank like a man half dead of thirst.

"Good!" he grunted, falling back. "Slaying is cursed dry work."

They had stanched the flow of blood, and the innate vitality of the barbarian was asserting itself.

"See first to the dagger-wound in my side," he bade the court physicians. "Rinaldo wrote me a deathly song there, and keen was the stylus."

"We should have hanged him long ago," gibbered Publius. "No good can come of poets – who is this?"

He nervously touched Ascalante's body with his sandalled toe.

"By Mitra!" ejaculated the commander. "It is Ascalante, once count of Thune!

What devil’s work brought him up from his desert haunts?”

“But why does he stare so?” whispered Publius, drawing away, his own eyes wide and a peculiar prickling among the short hairs at the back of his fat neck. The others fell silent as they gazed at the dead outlaw.

“Had you seen what he and I saw,” growled the king, sitting up despite the protests of the leeches, “you had not wondered. Blast your own gaze by looking at –” He stopped short, his mouth gaping, his finger pointing fruitlessly. Where the monster had died, only the bare floor met his eyes.

“Crom!” he swore. “The thing’s melted back into the foulness which bore it!”

“The king is delirious,” whispered a noble. Conan heard and swore with barbaric oaths.

“By Badb, Morrigan, Macha and Nemain!” he concluded wrathfully. “I am sane! It was like a cross between a Stygian mummy and a baboon. It came through the door, and Ascalante’s rogues fled before it. It slew Ascalante, who was about to run me through. Then it came upon me and I slew it – how I know not, for my ax glanced from it as from a rock. But I think that the Sage Epemitreus had a hand in it –”

“Hark how he names Epemitreus, dead for fifteen hundred years!” they whispered to each other.

“By Ymir!” thundered the king. “This night I talked with Epemitreus! He called to me in my dreams, and I walked down a black stone corridor carved with old gods, to a stone stair on the steps of which were the outlines of Set, until I came to a crypt, and a tomb with a phœnix carved on it –”

“In Mitra’s name, lord king, be silent!” It was the high-priest of Mitra who had cried out, and his face was ashen. Conan threw up his head like a lion tossing back its mane, and his eyes blazed.

“And who are you to shut my mouth?” his voice was thick with the snarl of a maddened tiger.

“Nay, nay, my lord,” the high-priest was trembling, but not through fear of the

king’s fury. “I meant no discourtesy.” He bent his head close to the king and spoke in a whisper that carried only to Conan’s ears.

“Lord king, this is a matter beyond human knowledge. Only the inner circle of the priest-craft know of the black stone corridor carved in the black heart of Mount Golamira, by unknown hands, or of the tomb with the phœnix brooding over it, where Epemitreus was laid to rest fifteen hundred years ago. And since that time no living man has entered it, for his chosen priests, after placing the Sage in the crypt, blocked up the outer entrance so no man could find it, and today not even the high-priests know where it is. Only by word of mouth, handed down by the high-priests to the chosen few, and jealously guarded, do the inner circle of Mitra’s neophytes know of the resting-place of Epemitreus in the black heart of Golamira.”

“I can not say by what magic Epemitreus brought me to him,” answered Conan. “But I talked with him, and he made a mark on my sword, and though the blade broke on Gromel’s helmet, the fragment was long enough to kill the monster. And it died there on the floor.”

Then silence fell shudderingly over the people as they looked closer, and some fell on their knees calling on Mitra, and some fled screaming from the chamber.

For on the floor where the monster had died, there lay, like a tangible shadow, a broad dark stain that could not be washed out. The thing had left its outline clearly etched in its blood, and that outline was of a being which could have been neither man nor beast, nor any being of a sane or normal world.

“Let me see your sword,” whispered the high-priest from a throat gone suddenly dry.

Conan held out the weapon, and the high-priest cried out and fell to his knees. “Mitra guard us against the powers of darkness!” he gasped, ashy-faced. “You have surely talked with Epemitreus this night! It is the secret sign none might make but he – the sign of the immortal phœnix which broods forever over his tomb!”

Conan scowled bewilderedly.

“How could that mark make demons vulnerable to my sword?”

The high-priest shook his head as he rose.

“The mysteries of the shadows are beyond our grasp. Symbols are but the external signs of hidden powers. We only see the outward evidences; we do not see the eternal play of the forces which lie behind; the powers of Light opposed to the powers of Darkness. By a symbol of evil, a sorcerer calls forth nightmare shapes from the abyss; by a symbol of Light, they are hurled back again. Dark wings shadow our souls; other unseen wings are spread protectingly over us.

The wisest of us are but blind children groping in the darkness.”

“By Crom,” said Conan, “the gods and demons of civilization are as complex and mysterious as everything else pertaining to it. I am indeed a blind man groping in the night. But this much I understand – there is a wizard in the kingdom to be run down. But this – this stain on the floor, what was it?”

The high-priest shuddered as he took the sword with uncertain hands.

“Mitra only knows what shapes brood in the Outer Darkness, or stalk the world unseen. But I see the hand of Set behind this. Look for a Stygian when you hunt your wizard, lord king. This stain on the floor – unless we be all madmen – it is a counterpart of the shadow that would be cast by a carven apish god which I saw long ago, squatting on the altar of a dim temple of the shadows in a far land that bordered the dark country of Stygia.”

Notes on Various Peoples of the Hyborian Age

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Aquilonians. This was a more or less pure-blooded race, though modified by contact with the Zingarans in the south, and, much less extensively, with the Bossonians of the west and north.

Aquilonia, as the western-most of the Hyborian kingdoms, retained frontier traditions equalled only by the more ancient kingdom of Hyperborea and the Border Kingdom. Its most important provinces were Poitain in the south,

Gunderland in the north, and Attalus in the southeast. The Aquilonians were a tall race, averaging five feet, ten and three fourths inches in height, and were generally inclined to be rangy, though in the last generations the city dwellers inclined toward portliness. They varied in complection largely according to locality. Thus the people of Gunderland were uniformly tawny-haired and grey eyed, while the people of Poitain were almost as uniformly dark as their neighbors the Zingarans. All were inclined to be dolichocephalic, except a sprinkling of peasantry along the Bossonian borders, whose type had been modified by admixture with the latter race, and here and there in the more primitive parts of the kingdom where remnants of unclassified aboriginal races still existed, absorbed into the surrounding population. The people of Attalus boasted the greatest advances in commerce and culture, though the whole level of Aquilonian civilization was enviable. Their language was much like the other Hyborian tongues, and their chief god was Mitra. At the height of their power their religion was of a refined and imaginative type, and they did not practise human sacrifice. In war they relied largely upon their cavalry, heavily armed knights. Their pikemen and spearmen were mainly Gundermen, while their archers were supplied from the Bossonian marches.

Gundermen. Gunderland was once a separate kingdom, but was brought into the larger kingdom, less by conquest than agreement. Its people never considered themselves exactly Aquilonians, and after the fall of the great kingdom, Gunderland existed for several generations in its former state as a separate principality. Their ways were ruder and more primitively Hyborian than those of the Aquilonians, their main concession to the ways of their more civilized southern neighbors being the adoption of the god Mitra in place of the primitive Bori

– a worship to which they returned, however, upon the fall of Aquilonia. They were, next to the Hyperboreans, the tallest of the Hyborian races. They were fine soldiers, and inclined to wander far. Gunderland mercenaries were to be found in all the armies of the Hyborian kingdoms, and in Zamora and the more powerful kingdoms of Shem.

Cimmerians. These people were descendants of the ancient Atlanteans, though they themselves 348

were unware of their descent, having evolved by their own efforts from the ape-men to which their ancient ancestors had sunk. They were a tall powerful race, averaging six feet in height.

They were black haired, and grey or blue eyed. They were dolichocephalic, and dark skinned, though not so dark as either the Zingarans, Zamorians or Picts. They were barbaric and warlike, and were never conquered, although, at the end of the Hyborian Age, the southward drifting Nordics drove them from their country. They were a moody, brooding race, whose gods were Crom and his brood. They did not practise human sacrifice, for it was their belief that their gods were indifferent to the fate of men. They fought on foot, mainly, and made savage raids on their neighbors to the east, north, and south.

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The Coming of Conan The Cimmerian

The Hyborian Age

The Hyborian Age

(Nothing in this article is to be considered as an attempt to advance any theory in opposition to accepted history. It is simply a fictional background for a series of fiction stories. When I began writing the Conan stories a few years ago, I prepared this "history" of his age and the peoples of that age, in order to lend him and his sagas a greater aspect of realness. And I found that by adhering to the "facts" and spirit of that history, in writing the stories, it was easier to visualize (and therefore to present) him as a real flesh-and-blood character rather than a ready-made product. In writing about him and his adventures in the various kingdoms of his Age, I have never violated the "facts" or spirit of the "history" here set down, but have followed the lines of that history as closely as the writer of actual historical-fiction follows the lines of actual history. I have used this "history" as a guide in all the stories in this series that I have written.)

Of that epoch known by the Nemedian chroniclers as the Pre-Cataclysmic Age, little is known except the latter part, and that is veiled in the mists of legendry. Known history begins with the waning of the Pre-Cataclysmic civilization, dominated by the kingdoms of Kamelia, Valusia, Verulia, Grondar, Thule, and Commoria. These peoples spoke a similar language, arguing a common origin. There were other kingdoms, equally civilized, but inhabited by different, and apparently older races.

The barbarians of that age were the Picts, who lived on islands far out on the western ocean; the Atlanteans, who dwelt on a small continent between the Pictish Islands and the main, or Thurian Continent; and the Lemurians, who inhabited a chain of large islands in the eastern hemisphere.

There were vast regions of unexplored land. The civilized kingdoms, though enormous in extent, occupied a comparatively small portion of the whole planet. Valusia was the westernmost kingdom of the Thurian Continent; Grondar the eastern-most. East of Grondar, whose people were less highly cultured than those of their kindred kingdoms, stretched a wild and barren expanse of deserts. Among the less arid stretches of desert, in the jungles, and among the mountains, lived scattered clans and tribes of primitive savages. Far to the south there was a mysterious civilization, unconnected with the Thurian culture, and apparently pre-human in its nature. On the far eastern shores of the Continent there lived another race, human, but 350

mysterious and non-Thurian, with which the Lemurians from time to time came in contact.

They apparently came from a shadowy and nameless continent lying somewhere east of the Lemurian Islands.

The Thurian civilization was crumbling; their armies were composed largely of barbarian mercenaries. Picts, Atlanteans, and Lemurians were their generals, their statesmen, often their kings. Of the bickerings of the kingdoms, and the wars between Valusia and Commoria, as well as the conquests by which the Atlanteans founded a kingdom on the mainland, there are more legends than accurate history.

Then the Cataclysm rocked the world. Atlantis and Lemuria sank, and the Pictish Islands were heaved up to form the mountain peaks of a new continent. Sections of the Thurian Continent vanished under the waves, or sinking, formed great inland lakes and seas. Volcanoes broke forth and terrific earthquakes shook down the shining cities of the empires. Whole nations were blotted out.

The barbarians fared a little better than the civilized races. The inhabitants of the Pictish Islands were destroyed, but a great colony of them, settled among the mountains of Valusia’s southern frontier, to serve as a buffer against foreign invasion, was untouched. The Continental kingdom of the Atlanteans likewise escaped the common ruin, and to it came thousands of their tribesmen in ships from the sinking land. Many Lemurians escaped to the eastern coast of the Thurian Continent, which was comparatively untouched. There they were enslaved by the ancient race which already dwelt there, and their history, for thousands of years, is a history of brutal servitude.

In the western part of the Continent, changing conditions created strange forms of plant and animal life. Thick jungles covered the plains, great rivers cut their roads to the sea, wild mountains were heaved up, and lakes covered the ruins of old cities in fertile valleys. To the continental kingdom of the Atlanteans, from sunken areas, swarmed myriads of beasts and savages – ape-men and apes. Forced to battle continually for their lives, they yet managed to retain vestiges of their former state of highly-advanced barbarism. Robbed of metals and ores, they became workers in stone like their distant ancestors, and had attained a real artistic level, when their struggling culture came into contact with the powerful Pictish nation. The Picts had also reverted to flint, but had advanced more rapidly in the matter of population and war-science. They had none of the Atlanteans' artistic nature; they were a ruder, more practical, more prolific race. They left no pictures painted or carved on ivory, as did their enemies, but they left remarkably efficient flint weapons in plenty.

These stone age kingdoms clashed, and in a series of bloody wars, the outnumbered Atlanteans were hurled back into a state of savagery, and the evolution of the Picts was halted. Five hundred years after the Cataclysm the barbaric kingdoms have vanished. It is now a nation of savages – the Picts – carrying on continual warfare with tribes of savages – the Atlanteans. The 351

Picts had the advantage of numbers and unity, whereas the Atlanteans had fallen into loosely-knit clans. That was the west of that day.

In the distant east, cut off from the rest of the world by the heaving up of gigantic mountains and the forming of a chain of vast lakes, the Lemurians are toiling as slaves of their ancient masters. The far south is still veiled in mystery. Untouched by the Cataclysm, its destiny is still pre-human. Of the civilized races of the Thurian Continent, a remnant of one of the non-Valusian nations dwells among the low mountains of the southeast – the Zhemri. Here and there about the world are scattered clans of apish savages, entirely ignorant of the rise and fall of the great civilizations. But in the far north another people are slowly coming into existence.

At the time of the Cataclysm, a band of savages, whose development was not much above that of the Neanderthal, fled to the north to escape destruction. They found the snow-countries inhabited only by a species of ferocious snow-apes – huge shaggy white animals, apparently native to that climate. These they fought and drove beyond the arctic circle, to perish, as the savages thought. The latter, then, adapted themselves to their hardy new environment

and throve.

After the Pictish-Atlantean wars had destroyed the beginnings of what might have been a new culture, another, lesser cataclysm further altered the appearance of the original continent, left a great inland sea where the chain of lakes had been, to further separate west from east, and the attendant earthquakes, floods and volcanoes completed the ruin of the barbarians which their tribal wars had begun.

A thousand years after the lesser cataclysm, the western world is seen to be a wild country of jungles and lakes and torrential rivers. Among the forest-covered hills of the northwest exist wandering bands of ape-men, without human speech, or the knowledge of fire or the use of implements. They are the descendants of the Atlanteans, sunk back into the squalling chaos of jungle-bestiality from which ages ago their ancestors so laboriously crawled. To the southwest dwell scattered clans of degraded, cave-dwelling savages, whose speech is of the most primitive form, yet who still retain the name of Picts, which has come to mean merely a term designating men – themselves, to distinguish them from the true beasts with which they contend for life and food. It is their only link with their former stage. Neither the squalid Picts nor the apish Atlanteans have any contact with other tribes or peoples.

Far to the east, the Lemurians, levelled almost to a bestial plane themselves by the brutishness of their slavery, have risen and destroyed their masters. They are savages stalking among the ruins of a strange civilization. The survivors of that civilization, who have escaped the fury of their slaves, have come westward. They fall upon that mysterious pre-human kingdom of the south and overthrow it, substituting their own culture, modified by contact with the older one.

The newer kingdom is called Stygia, and remnants of the older nation seemed to have survived, and even been worshipped, after the race as a whole had been destroyed.

Here and there in the world small groups of savages are showing signs of an upward trend; these are scattered and unclassified. But in the north, the tribes are growing. These people are called Hyborians, or Hybori; their god was Bori – some great chief, whom legend made even more ancient as the king who led them into the north, in the days of the great Cataclysm, which the

tribes remember only in distorted folklore.

They have spread over the north, and are pushing southward in leisurely treks. So far they have not come in contact with any other races; their wars have been with one another. Fifteen hundred years in the north country have made them a tall, tawny-haired, grey-eyed race, vigorous and warlike, and already exhibiting a well-defined artistry and poetism of nature.

They still live mostly by the hunt, but the southern tribes have been raising cattle for some centuries. There is one exception in their so far complete isolation from other races: a wanderer into the far north returned with the news that the supposedly deserted ice wastes were inhabited by an extensive tribe of ape-like men, descended, he swore, from the beasts driven out of the more habitable land by the ancestors of the Hyborians. He urged that a large war-party be sent beyond the arctic circle to exterminate these beasts, whom he swore were evolving into true men. He was jeered at; a small band of adventurous young warriors followed him into the north, but none returned.

But tribes of the Hyborians were drifting south, and as the population increased this movement became extensive. The following age was an epoch of wandering and conquest. Across the history of the world tribes and drifts of tribes move and shift in an everchanging panorama.

Look at the world five hundred years later. Tribes of tawny-haired Hyborians have moved southward and westward, conquering and destroying many of the small unclassified clans.

Absorbing the blood of conquered races, already the descendants of the older drifts have begun to show modified racial traits, and these mixed races are attacked fiercely by new, purer-blooded drifts, and swept before them, as a broom sweeps debris impartially, to become even more mixed and mingled in the tangled debris of races and tag-ends of races.

As yet the conquerors have not come in contact with the older races. To the southeast the descendants of the Zhemri, given impetus by new blood resulting from admixture with some unclassified tribe, are beginning to seek to revive some faint shadow of their ancient culture.

To the west the apish Atlanteans are beginning the long climb upward. They have completed the cycle of existence; they have long forgotten their former existence as men; unaware of any other former state, they are starting the climb unhelped and unhindered by human memories.

To the south of them the Picts remain savages, apparently defying the laws of Nature by neither progressing nor retrogressing. Far to the south dreams the ancient mysterious kingdom of Stygia. On its eastern borders wander clans of nomadic savages, already known as the Sons of Shem.

Next to the Picts, in the broad valley of Zingg, protected by great mountains, a nameless band of primitives, tentatively classified as akin to the Shemites, has evolved an advanced agricultural system and existence.

Another factor has added to the impetus of Hyborian drift. A tribe of that race has discovered the use of stone in building, and the first Hyborian kingdom has come into being – the rude and barbaric kingdom of Hyperborea, which had its beginning in a crude fortress of boulders heaped to repel tribal attack. The people of this tribe soon abandoned their horse-hide tents for stone houses, crudely but mightily built, and thus protected, they grew strong. There are few more dramatic events in history than the rise of the rude, fierce kingdom of Hyperborea, whose people turned abruptly from their nomadic life to rear dwellings of naked stone, surrounded by cyclopean walls – a race scarcely emerged from the polished stone age, who had by a freak of chance, learned the first rude principles of architecture.

The rise of this kingdom drove forth many other tribes, for, defeated in war, or refusing to become tributary to their castle-dwelling kinsmen, many clans set forth on long treks that took them half-way around the world. And already the more northern tribes are beginning to be harried by gigantic blond savages, not much more advanced than ape-men.

The tale of the next thousand years is the tale of the rise of the Hyborians, whose warlike tribes dominate the western world. Rude kingdoms are taking shape. The tawny-haired invaders have encountered the Picts, driving them into the barren lands of the west. To the northwest, the descendants of the Atlanteans, climbing unaided from apedom into primitive savagery, have not yet met the conquerors. Far to the east the Lemurians are evolving a strange semi-civilization of their own. To the south the Hyborians have founded the kingdom of Koth, on the borders of those pastoral countries known as the Lands of Shem, and the savages of those lands, partly through contact with the Hyborians, partly through contact with the Stygians who have ravaged them for centuries, are emerging from barbarism. The blond savages of the far north have grown in power and numbers so that the northern Hyborian tribes

move southward, driving their kindred clans before them. The ancient kingdom of Hyperborea is overthrown by one of these northern tribes, which, however, retains the old name. Southeast of Hyperborea a kingdom of the Zhemri has come into being, under the name of Zamora. To the southwest, a tribe of Picts have invaded the fertile valley of Zingg, conquered the agricultural people there, and settled among them. This mixed race was in turn conquered later by a roving tribe of Hybori, and from these mingled elements came the kingdom of Zingara.

Five hundred years later the kingdoms of the world are clearly defined. The kingdoms of the Hyborians – Aquilonia, Nemedia, Brythunia, Hyperborea, Koth, Ophir, Argos, Corinthia, and one known as the Border Kingdom – dominate the western world. Zamora lies to the east, and Zingara to the southwest of these kingdoms – peoples alike in darkness of complection and exotic habits, but otherwise unrelated. Far to the south sleeps Stygia, untouched by foreign invasion, but the peoples of Shem have exchanged the Stygian yoke for the less galling one of 354

Koth. The dusky masters have been driven south of the great river Styx, Nilus, or Nile, which, flowing north from the shadowy hinterlands, turns almost at right angles and flows almost due west through the pastoral meadowlands of Shem, to empty into the great sea. North of Aquilonia, the westernmost Hyborian kingdom, are the Cimmerians, ferocious savages, untamed by the invaders, but advancing rapidly because of contact with them; they are the descendants of the Atlanteans, now progressing more steadily than their old enemies the Picts, who dwell in the wilderness west of Aquilonia.

Another five centuries and the Hybori peoples are the possessors of a civilization so virile that contact with it virtually snatched out of the wallow of savagery such tribes as it touched. The most powerful kingdom is Aquilonia, but others vie with it in strength and splendor. The Hyborians have become a considerably mixed race; the nearest to the ancient root-stock are the Gundermen of Gunderland, a northern province of Aquilonia. But this mixing has not weakened the race. They are supreme in the western world, though the barbarians of the wastelands are growing in strength.

In the north, golden-haired, blue-eyed barbarians, descendants of the blond arctic savages, have driven the remaining Hyborian tribes out of the snow countries, except the ancient kingdom of Hyperborea, which resists their

onslaught. Their country is called Nordheim, and they are divided into the red-haired Vanir of Vanaheim, and the yellow-haired Æsir of Asgard.

Now the Lemurians enter history again as Hyrkanians. Through the centuries they have pushed steadily westward, and now a tribe skirts the southern end of the great inland sea – Vilayet –

and establishes the kingdom of Turan on the southwestern shore. Between the inland sea and the eastern borders of the native kingdoms lie vast expanses of steppes and in the extreme north and extreme south, deserts. The non-Hyrkanian dwellers of these territories are scattered and pastoral, unclassified in the north, Shemitish in the south, aboriginal, with a thin strain of Hyborian blood from wandering conquerors. Toward the latter part of the period other Hyrkanian clans push westward, around the northern extremity of the inland sea, and clash with the eastern outposts of the Hyperboreans.

Glance briefly at the peoples of that age. The dominant Hyborians are no longer uniformly tawny-haired and grey-eyed. They have mixed with other races. There is a strong Shemitish, even a Stygian strain among the peoples of Koth, and to a lesser extent, of Argos, while in the case of the latter, admixture with the Zingarans has been more extensive than with the Shemites. The eastern Brythunians have inter-married with the dark-skinned Zamorians, and the people of southern Aquilonia have mixed with the brown Zingarans until black hair and brown eyes are the dominant type in Poitain, the southern-most province. The ancient kingdom of Hyperborea is more aloof than the others, yet there is alien blood in plenty in its veins, from the capture of foreign women – Hyrkanians, Æsir, and Zamorians. Only in the province of Gunderland, where the people keep no slaves, is the pure Hyborian stock found unblemished.

But the barbarians have kept their bloodstream pure; the Cimmerians are tall and powerful, 355

with dark hair and blue or grey eyes. The people of Nordheim are of similar build, but with white skins, blue eyes and golden or red hair. The Picts are of the same type as they always were – short, very dark, with black eyes and hair. The Hyrkanians are dark and generally tall and slender, though a squat slant-eyed type is more and more common among them, resulting from mixture with a curious race of intelligent, though stunted, aborigines, conquered by them among the mountains east of Vilayet, on their westward drift. The Shemites are generally of medium height, though sometimes when

mixed with Stygian blood, gigantic, broadly and strongly built, with hook noses, dark eyes and blue-black hair. The Stygians are tall and well-made, dusky, straight-featured – at least the ruling classes are of that type. The lower classes are a down-trodden, mongrel horde, a mixture of negroid, Stygian, Shemitish, even Hyborian bloods. South of Stygia are the vast black kingdoms of the Amazons, the Kushites, the Atlaians, and the hybrid empire of Zimbabwe.

Between Aquilonia and the Pictish wilderness lie the Bossonian marches, peopled by descendants of an aboriginal race, conquered by a tribe of Hyborians, early in the first ages of the Hyborian drift. This mixed people never attained the civilization of the purer Hyborians, and was pushed by them to the very fringe of the civilized world. The Bossonians are of medium height and complection, their eyes brown or grey, and they are mesocephalic. They live mainly by agriculture, in large walled villages, and are part of the Aquilonian kingdom.

Their marches extend from the Border kingdom in the north to Zingara in the southwest, forming a bulwark for Aquilonia against both the Cimmerians and the Picts. They are stubborn defensive fighters, and centuries of warfare against northern and western barbarians have caused them to evolve a type of defense almost impregnable against direct attack.

Five hundred years later the Hyborian civilization was swept away. Its fall was unique in that it was not brought about by internal decay, but by the growing power of the barbarian nations, and the Hyrkanians. The Hyborian peoples were overthrown while their vigorous culture was in its prime.

Yet it was Aquilonia’s greed which brought about that overthrow, though indirectly. Wishing to extend their empire, her kings made war on their neighbors. Zingara, Argos and Ophir were annexed outright, with the western cities of Shem, which had, with their more eastern kindred, recently thrown off the yoke of Koth. Koth itself, with Corinthia and the eastern Shemitish tribes, was forced to pay Aquilonia tribute and lend aid in wars. An ancient feud had existed between Aquilonia and Hyperborea, and the latter now marched to meet the armies of her western rival. The plains of the Border Kingdom were the scene of a great and savage battle, in which the northern hosts were utterly defeated, and retreated into their snowy fastnesses, whither the victorious Aquilonians did not pursue them. Nemedia, which had successfully resisted the western kingdom for centuries, now drew Brythunia and Zamora, and secretly, Koth, into an alliance which bade fair to crush the rising empire. But before their armies could join battle, a new enemy

appeared in the east, as the Hyrkanians made their first real thrust at the western world. Reinforced by adventurers from east of Vilayet, the riders of Turan swept 356

over Zamora, devastated eastern Corinthia, and were met on the plains of Brythunia by the Aquilonians who defeated them and hurled them flying eastward. But the back of the alliance was broken, and Nemedia took the defensive in future wars, aided occasionally by Brythunia, and Hyperborea, and, secretly as usual, by Koth. This defeat of the Hyrkanians showed the nations the real power of the western kingdom, whose splendid armies were augmented by mercenaries, many of them recruited among the alien Zingarans, and the barbaric Picts and Shemites. Zamora was reconquered from the Hyrkanians, but the people discovered that they had merely exchanged an eastern master for a western master. Aquilonian soldiers were quartered there, not only to protect the ravaged country, but also to keep the people in subjection. The Hyrkanians were not convinced; three more invasions burst upon the Zamorian borders, and the Lands of Shem, and were hurled back by the Aquilonians, though the Turanian armies grew larger as hordes of steel-clad riders rode out of the east, skirting the southern extremity of the inland sea.

But it was in the west that a power was growing destined to throw down the kings of Aquilonia from their high places. In the north there was incessant bickering along the Cimmerian borders between the black-haired warriors and the Nordheimr; and the *Æ*sir, between wars with the Vanir, assailed Hyperborea and pushed back the frontier, destroying city after city. The Cimmerians also fought the Picts and Bossonians impartially, and several times raided into Aquilonia itself, but their wars were less invasions than mere plundering forays.

But the Picts were growing amazingly in population and power. By a strange twist of fate, it was largely due to the efforts of one man, and he an alien, that they set their feet upon the ways that led to eventual empire. This man was Arus, a Nemedian priest, a natural-born reformer.

What turned his mind toward the Picts is not certain, but this much is history – he determined to go into the western wilderness and modify the rude ways of the heathen by the introduction of the gentle worship of Mitra. He was not daunted by the grisly tales of what had happened to traders and explorers before him, and by some whim of fate he came among the people he sought,

alone and unarmed, and was not instantly speared.

The Picts had benefitted by contact with Hyborian civilization, but they had always fiercely resisted that contact. That is to say, they had learned to work crudely in copper and tin, which was found scantily in their country, and for which latter metal they raided into the mountains of Zingara, or traded hides, whale's teeth, walrus tusks and such few things as savages have to trade. They no longer lived in caves and tree-shelters, but built tents of hides, and crude huts, copied from those of the Bossonians. They still lived mainly by the chase, since their wilds swarmed with game of all sorts, and the rivers and sea with fish, but they had learned how to plant grain, which they did sketchily, preferring to steal it from their neighbors the Bossonians and Zingarans. They dwelt in clans which were generally at feud with each other, and their simple customs were blood-thirsty and utterly inexplicable to a civilized man, such as Arus of Nemedia. They had no direct contact with the Hyborians, since the Bossonians acted as a buffer between them. But Arus maintained that they were capable of progress, and events 357

proved the truth of his assertion – though scarcely in the way he meant.

Arus was fortunate in being thrown in with a chief of more than usual intelligence – Gorm by name. Gorm can not be explained, any more than Genghis Khan, Othman, Attila, or any of those individuals, who, born in naked lands among untutored barbarians, yet possess the instinct for conquest and empire-building. In a sort of bastard-Bossonian, the priest made the chief understand his purpose, and though extremely puzzled, Gorm gave him permission to remain among his tribe unbutchered – a case unique in the history of the race. Having learned the language Arus set himself to work to eliminate the more unpleasant phases of Pictish life

– such as human sacrifice, blood-feud, and the burning alive of captives. He harangued Gorm at length, whom he found to be an interested, if unresponsive listener. Imagination reconstructs the scene – the black-haired chief, in his tiger-skins and necklace of human teeth, squatting on the dirt floor of the wattle hut, listening intently to the eloquence of the priest, who probably sat on a carven, skin-covered block of mahogany provided in his honor – clad in the silken robes of a Nemedian priest, gesturing with his slender white hands as he expounded the eternal rights and justices which were the truths of Mitra. Doubtless he pointed with repugnance at the rows of skulls which adorned the walls of the hut and urged Gorm to forgive his

enemies instead of putting their bleached remnants to such use. Arus was the highest product of an innately artistic race, refined by centuries of civilization; Gorm had behind him a heritage of a hundred thousand years of screaming savagery – the pad of the tiger was in his stealthy step, the grip of the gorilla in his black-nailed hands, the fire that burns in a leopard's eyes burned in his.

Arus was a practical man. He appealed to the savage's sense of material gain; he pointed out the power and splendor of the Hyborian kingdoms, as an example of the power of Mitra, whose teachings and works had lifted them up to their high places. And he spoke of cities, and fertile plains, marble walls and iron chariots, jeweled towers, and horsemen in their glittering armor riding to battle. And Gorm, with the unerring instinct of the barbarian, passed over his words regarding gods and their teachings, and fixed on the material powers thus vividly described.

There in that mud-floored wattle hut, with the silk-robed priest on the mahogany block, and the dark-skinned chief crouching in his tiger-hides, was laid the foundations of empire.

As has been said, Arus was a practical man. He dwelt among the Picts and found much that an intelligent man could do to aid humanity, even when that humanity was cloaked in tiger-skins and wore necklaces of human teeth. Like all priests of Mitra, he was instructed in many things.

He found that there were vast deposits of iron ore in the Pictish hills, and he taught the natives to mine, smelt and work it into implements – agricultural implements, as he fondly believed.

He instituted other reforms, but these were the most important things he did: he instilled in Gorm a desire to see the civilized lands of the world; he taught the Picts how to work in iron; and he established contact between them and the civilized world. At the chief's request he conducted him and some of his warriors through the Bossonian marches, where the honest villagers stared in amazement, into the glittering outer world.

Arus no doubt thought that he was making converts right and left, because the Picts listened to him, and refrained from smiting him with their copper axes. But the Pict was little calculated to seriously regard teachings which bade him

forgive his enemy and abandon the war-path for the ways of honest drudgery. It has been said that he lacked artistic sense; his whole nature led to war and slaughter. When the priest talked of the glories of the civilized nations, his dark-skinned listeners were intent, not on the ideals of his religion, but on the loot which he unconsciously described in the narration of rich cities and shining lands. When he told how Mitra aided certain kings to overcome their enemies, they paid scant heed to the miracles of Mitra, but they hung on the description of battle-lines, mounted knights, and maneuvers of archers and spearmen. They harkened with keen dark eyes and inscrutable countenances, and they went their ways without comment, and heeded with flattering intentness his instructions as to the working of iron, and kindred arts.

Before his coming they had filched steel weapons and armor from the Bossonians and Zingarans, or had hammered out their own crude arms from copper and bronze. Now a new world opened to them, and the clang of sledges re-echoed throughout the land. And Gorm, by virtue of this new craft, began to assert his dominance over other clans, partly by war, partly by craft and diplomacy, in which latter art he excelled all other barbarians.

Picts now came and went freely into Aquilonia, under safe-conduct, and they returned with more information as to armor-forging and sword-making. More, they entered Aquilonia’s mercenary armies, to the unspeakable disgust of the sturdy Bossonians. Aquilonia’s kings toyed with the idea of playing the Picts against the Cimmerians, and possibly thus destroying both menaces, but they were too busy with their policies of aggression in the south and east to pay much heed to the vaguely-known lands of the west, from which more and more stocky warriors swarmed to take service among the mercenaries.

These warriors, their service completed, went back to their wilderness with good ideas of civilized warfare, and that contempt for civilization which arises from familiarity with it.

Drums began to beat in the hills, gathering-fires smoked on the heights, and savage sword-makers hammered their steel on a thousand anvils. By intrigues and forays too numerous and devious to enumerate, Gorm became chief of chiefs, the nearest approach to a king the Picts had had in thousands of years. He had waited long; he was past middle age. But now he moved against the frontiers, not in trade, but in war.

Arus saw his mistake too late; he had not touched the soul of the pagan, in which lurked the hard fierceness of all the ages. His persuasive eloquence had not caused a ripple in the Pictish conscience. Gorm wore a corselet of silvered

mail now, instead of the tiger-skin, but underneath he was unchanged – the everlasting barbarian, unmoved by theology or philosophy, his instincts fixed unerringly on rapine and plunder.

The Picts burst on the Bossonian frontiers with fire and sword, not clad in tiger-skins and 359

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brandishing copper axes as of yore, but in scale-mail, wielding weapons of keen steel. As for Arus, he was brained by a drunken Pict, while making a last effort to undo the work he had unwittingly done. Gorm was not without gratitude; he caused the skull of the slayer to be set on the top of the priest's cairn. And it is one of the grim ironies of the universe that the stones which covered Arus' body should have been adorned with that last touch of barbarity – above a man to whom violence and blood-vengeance were revolting.

But the newer weapons and mail were not enough to break the lines. For years the superior armaments and sturdy courage of the Bossonians held the invaders at bay, aided, when necessary, by imperial Aquilonian troops. During this time the Hyrkanians came and went, and Zamora was added to the empire.

Then treachery from an unexpected source broke the Bossonian lines. Before chronicling this treachery, it might be well to glance briefly at the Aquilonian empire. Always a rich kingdom, untold wealth had been rolled in by conquest, and sumptuous splendor had taken the place of simple and hardy living. But degeneracy had not yet sapped the kings and the people; though clad in silks and cloth-of-gold, they were still a vital, virile race. But arrogance was supplanting their former simplicity. They treated less powerful people with growing contempt, levying more and more tributes on the conquered. Argos, Zingara, Ophir, Zamora and the Shemite countries were treated as subjugated provinces, which was especially galling to the proud Zingarans, who often revolted, despite savage retaliations.

Koth was practically tributary, being under Aquilonia's "protection" against the Hyrkanians.

But Nemedia the western empire had never been able to subdue, although the latter's triumphs were of the defensive sort, and were generally attained with the aid of Hyperborean armies.

During this period Aquilonia's only defeats were: her failure to annex Nemedia; the rout of an army sent into Cimmeria; and the almost complete destruction of an army by the Æsir. Just as the Hyrkanians found themselves unable to withstand the heavy cavalry charges of the Aquilonians, so the latter, invading the snow countries, were overwhelmed by the ferocious hand-to-hand fighting of the Nordics. But Aquilonia's conquests were pushed to the Nilus, where a Stygian army was defeated with great slaughter, and the king of Stygia sent tribute –

once at least – to divert invasion of his kingdom. Brythunia was reduced in a series of whirlwind wars, and preparations were made to subjugate the ancient rival at last – Nemedia.

With their glittering hosts greatly increased by mercenaries, the Aquilonians moved against their old-time foe, and it seemed as if the thrust were destined to crush the last shadow of Nemedian independence. But contentions arose between the Aquilonians and their Bossonian auxiliaries.

As the inevitable result of imperial expansion, the Aquilonians had become haughty and intolerant. They derided the ruder, unsophisticated Bossonians, and hard feeling grew between them – the Aquilonians despising the Bossonians, and the latter resenting the attitude of their 360

masters – who now boldly called themselves such, and treated the Bossonians like conquered subjects, taxing them exorbitantly, and conscripting them for their wars of territorial expansion

– wars the profits of which the Bossonians shared little. Scarcely enough men were left in the marches to guard the frontier, and hearing of Pictish outrages in their homelands, whole Bossonian regiments quit the Nemedian campaign and marched to the western frontier, where they defeated the dark-skinned invaders in a great battle.

This desertion, however, was the direct cause of Aquilonia's defeat by the desperate Nemedians, and brought down on the Bossonians the cruel wrath of the imperialists –

intolerant and short-sighted as imperialists invariably are. Aquilonian regiments were secretly brought to the borders of the marches, the Bossonian chiefs were invited to attend a great conclave, and, in the guise of an expedition against the Picts, bands of savage Shemitish soldiers were

quartered among the unsuspecting villagers. The unarmed chiefs were massacred, the Shemites turned on their stunned hosts with torch and sword, and the armored imperial hosts were hurled ruthlessly on the unsuspecting people. From north to south the marches were ravaged and the Aquilonian armies marched back from the borders, leaving a ruined and devastated land behind them.

And then the Pictish invasion burst in full power along those borders. It was no mere raid, but the concerted rush of a whole nation, led by chiefs who had served in Aquilonian armies, and planned and directed by Gorm – an old man now, but with the fire of his fierce ambition undimmed. This time there were no strong walled villages in their path, manned by sturdy archers, to hold back the rush until the imperial troops could be brought up. The remnants of the Bossonians were swept out of existence, and the blood-mad barbarians swarmed into Aquilonia, looting and burning, before the legions, warring again with the Nemedians, could be marched into the west. Zingara seized this opportunity to throw off the yoke, which example was followed by Corinthia and the Shemites. Whole regiments of mercenaries and vassals mutinied and marched back to their own countries, looting and burning as they went. The Picts surged irresistibly eastward, and host after host was trampled beneath their feet. Without their Bossonian archers the Aquilonians found themselves unable to cope with the terrible arrow-fire of the barbarians. From all parts of the empire legions were recalled to resist the onrush, while from the wilderness horde after horde swarmed forth, in apparently inexhaustible supply. And in the midst of this chaos, the Cimmerians swept down from their hills, completing the ruin.

They looted cities, devastated the country, and retired into the hills with their plunder, but the Picts occupied the land they had over-run. And the Aquilonian empire went down in fire and blood.

Then again the Hyrkanians rode from the blue east. The withdrawal of the imperial legions from Zamora was their incitement. Zamora fell easy prey to their thrusts, and the Hyrkanian king established his capital in the largest city of the country. This invasion was from the ancient Hyrkanian kingdom of Turan, on the shores of the inland sea, but another, more savage Hyrkanian thrust came from the north. Hosts of steel-clad riders galloped around the northern 361

extremity of the inland sea, traversed the icy deserts, entered the steppes,

driving the aborigines before them, and launched themselves against the western kingdoms. These newcomers were not at first allies with the Turanians, but skirmished with them as with the Hyborians; new drifts of eastern warriors bickered and fought, until all were united under a great chief, who came riding from the very shores of the eastern ocean. With no Aquilonian armies to oppose them, they were invincible. They swept over and subjugated Brythunia, and devastated southern Hyperborea, and Corinthia. They swept into the Cimmerian hills, driving the black-haired barbarians before them, but among the hills, where cavalry was less effectual, the Cimmerians turned on them, and only a disorderly retreat, at the end of a whole day of bloody fighting, saved the Hyrkanian hosts from complete annihilation.

While these events had been transpiring, the kingdoms of Shem had conquered their ancient master, Koth, and had been defeated in an attempted invasion of Stygia. But scarcely had they completed their degradation of Koth, when they were over-run by the Hyrkanians, and found themselves subjugated by sterner masters than the Hyborians had ever been. Meanwhile the Picts had made themselves complete masters of Aquilonia, practically blotting out the inhabitants. They had broken over the borders of Zingara, and thousands of Zingarans, fleeing the slaughter into Argos, threw themselves on the mercy of the westward-sweeping Hyrkanians, who settled them in Zamora as subjects. Behind them as they fled, Argos was enveloped in the flame and slaughter of Pictish conquest, and the slayers swept into Ophir and clashed with the westward-riding Hyrkanians. The latter, after their conquest of Shem, had overthrown a Stygian army at the Nilus and overrun the country as far south as the black kingdom of Amazon, of whose people they brought back thousands as captives, settling them among the Shemites. Possibly they would have completed their conquests in Stygia, adding it to their widening empire, but for the fierce thrusts of the Picts against their western conquests.

Nemedia, unconquerable by Hyborians, reeled between the riders of the east, and the swordsmen of the west, when a tribe of Æsir, wandering down from their snowy lands, came into the kingdom, and were engaged as mercenaries; they proved such able warriors that they not only beat off the Hyrkanians, but halted the eastward advance of the Picts.

The world at that time presents some such picture: a vast Pictish empire, wild, rude and barbaric, stretches from the coasts of Vanaheim in the north to the southern-most shores of Zingara. It stretches east to include all Aquilonia except Gunderland, the northern-most province, which, as a separate kingdom in the hills, survived the fall of the empire, and still maintains its

independence. The Pictish empire also includes Argos, Ophir, the western part of Koth, and the western-most lands of Shem. Opposed to this barbaric empire is the empire of the Hyrkanians, of which the northern boundaries are the ravaged lines of Hyperborea, and the southern, the deserts south of the lands of Shem. Zamora, Brythunia, the Border Kingdom, Corinthia, most of Koth, and all the eastern lands of Shem are included in this empire. The borders of Cimmeria are intact; neither Pict nor Hyrkanian has been able to subdue these warlike barbarians. Nemedia, dominated by the Æsir mercenaries, resists all invasions. In the 362

north Nordheim, Cimmeria and Nemedia separate the conquering races, but in the south, Koth has become a battle-ground where Picts and Hyrkanians war incessantly. Sometimes the eastern warriors expel the barbarians from the kingdom entirely; again the plains and cities are in the hands of the western invaders. In the far south Stygia, shaken by the Hyrkanian invasion, is being encroached upon by the great black kingdoms. And in the far north, the Nordic tribes are restless, warring continually with the Cimmerians, and sweeping the Hyperborean frontiers.

Gorm was slain by Hialmar, a chief of the Nemedian Æsir. He was a very old man, nearly a hundred years old. In the seventy-five years which had elapsed since he first heard the tale of empires from the lips of Arus – a long time in the life of a man, but a brief space in the tale of nations – he had welded an empire from straying savage clans, he had overthrown a civilization. He who had been born in a mud-walled, wattle-roofed hut, in his old age sat on golden thrones, and gnawed joints of beef presented to him on golden dishes by naked slave-girls who were the daughters of kings. Conquest and the acquiring of wealth altered not the Pict; out of the ruins of the crushed civilization no new culture arose phoenix-like. The dark hands which shattered the artistic glories of the conquered never tried to copy them. Though he sat among the glittering ruins of shattered palaces and clad his hard body in the silks of vanquished kings, the Pict remained the eternal barbarian, ferocious, elemental, interested only in the naked primal principles of life, unchanging, unerring in his instincts which were all for war and plunder, and in which arts and the cultured progress of humanity had no place. Not so with the Æsir who settled in Nemedia. These soon adopted many of the ways of their civilized allies, modified powerfully, however, by their own intensely virile and alien culture.

For a short age Pict and Hyrkanian snarled at each other over the ruins of the

world they had conquered. Then began the glacier ages, and the great Nordic drift. Before the southward moving ice-fields the northern tribes drifted, driving kindred clans before them. The Æsir blotted out the ancient kingdom of Hyperborea, and across its ruins came to grips with the Hyrkanians. Nemedia had already become a Nordic kingdom, ruled by the descendants of the Æsir mercenaries. Driven before the onrushing tides of Nordic invasion, the Cimmerians were on the march, and neither army nor city stood before them. They surged across and completely destroyed the kingdom of Gunderland, and marched across ancient Aquilonia, hewing their irresistible way through the Pictish hosts. They defeated the Nordic-Nemedians and sacked some of their cities, but did not halt. They continued eastward, overthrowing an Hyrkanian army on the borders of Brythunia.

Behind them hordes of Æsir and Vanir swarmed into the lands, and the Pictish empire reeled beneath their strokes. Nemedia was overthrown, and the half-civilized Nordics fled before their wilder kinsmen, leaving the cities of Nemedia ruined and deserted. These fleeing Nordics, who had adopted the name of the older kingdom, and to whom the term Nemedian henceforth refers, came into the ancient land of Koth, expelled both Picts and Hyrkanians, and aided the people of Shem to throw off the Hyrkanian yoke. All over the western world, the Picts and Hyrkanians were staggering before this younger, fiercer people. A band of Æsir drove the 363

eastern riders from Brythunia and settled there themselves, adopting the name for themselves.

The Nordics who had conquered Hyperborea assailed their eastern enemies so savagely that the dark-skinned descendants of the Lemurians retreated into the steppes, pushed irresistibly back toward Vilayet.

Meanwhile the Cimmerians, wandering southeastward, destroyed the ancient Hyrkanian kingdom of Turan, and settled on the southwestern shores of the inland sea. The power of the eastern conquerors was broken. Before the attacks of the Nordheimr and the Cimmerians, they destroyed all their cities, butchered such captives as were not fit to make the long march, and then, herding thousands of slaves before them, rode back into the mysterious east, skirting the northern edge of the sea, and vanishing from western history, until they rode out of the east again, thousands of years later, as Huns, Mongols, Tatars and Turks. With them in their retreat went thousands of Zamorians and Zingarans, who were settled together far to the east, formed a mixed race, and

emerged ages afterward as gypsies.

Meanwhile, also, a tribe of Vanir adventurers had passed along the Pictish coast southward, ravaged ancient Zingara, and come into Stygia, which, oppressed by a cruel aristocratic ruling class, was staggering under the thrusts of the black kingdoms to the south. The red-haired Vanir led the slaves in a general revolt, overthrew the reigning class, and set themselves up as a caste of conquerors. They subjugated the northern-most black kingdoms, and built a vast southern empire, which they called Egypt. From these red-haired conquerors the earlier Pharaohs boasted descent.

The western world was now dominated by Nordic barbarians. The Picts still held Aquilonia and part of Zingara, and the western coast of the continent. But east to Vilayet, and from the arctic circle to the lands of Shem, the only inhabitants were roving tribes of Nordheimr, excepting the Cimmerians, settled in the old Turanian kingdom. There were no cities anywhere, except in Stygia and the lands of Shem; the invading tides of Picts, Hyrkanians, Cimmerians and Nordics had levelled them in ruins, and the once dominant Hyborians had vanished from the earth, leaving scarcely a trace of their blood in the veins of their conquerors.

Only a few names of lands, tribes and cities remained in the languages of the barbarians, to come down through the centuries connected with distorted legend and fable, until the whole history of the Hyborian age was lost sight of in a cloud of myths and fantasies. Thus in the speech of the gypsies lingered the terms Zingara and Zamora; the Æsir who dominated Nemedia were called Nemedians, and later figured in Irish history, and the Nordics who settled in Brythunia were known as Brythunians, Brythons, or Britons.

There was no such thing, at that time, as a consolidated Nordic empire. As always, the tribes had each its own chief or king, and they fought savagely among themselves. What their destiny might have been will not be known, because another terrific convulsion of the earth, carving out the lands as they are known to moderns, hurled all into chaos again. Great strips of the western coast sank; Vanaheim and western Asgard – uninhabited and glacier-haunted wastes 364

for a hundred years – vanished beneath the waves. The ocean flowed around the mountains of western Cimmeria to form the North Sea; these mountains became the islands later known as England, Scotland and Ireland, and the waves rolled over what had been the Pictish wilderness and the Bossonian

marches. In the north the Baltic Sea was formed, cutting Asgard into the peninsulas later known as Norway, Sweden and Denmark, and far to the south the Stygian continent was broken away from the rest of the world, on the line of cleavage formed by the river Nilus in its westward trend. Over Argos, western Koth and the western lands of Shem, washed the blue ocean men later called the Mediterranean. But where land sank elsewhere, a vast expanse west of Stygia rose out of the waves, forming the whole western half of the continent of Africa.

The buckling of the land thrust up great mountain ranges in the central part of the northern continent. Whole Nordic tribes were blotted out, and the rest retreated eastward. The territory about the slowly drying inland sea was not affected, and there, on the western shores, the Nordic tribes began a pastoral existence, living in more or less peace with the Cimmerians, and gradually mixing with them. In the west the remnants of the Picts, reduced by the cataclysm once more to the status of stone age savages, began, with the incredible virility of their race, once more to possess the land, until, at a later age, they were overthrown by the westward drift of the Cimmerians and Nordics. This was so long after the breaking-up of the continent that only meaningless legends told of former empires.

This drift comes within the reach of modern history and need not be repeated. It resulted from a growing population which thronged the steppes west of the inland sea – which still later, much reduced in size, was known as the Caspian – to such an extent that migration became an economic necessity. The tribes moved southward, northward and westward, into those lands now known as India, Asia Minor, and central and western Europe.

They came into these countries as Aryans. But there were variations among these primitive Aryans, some of which are still recognized today, others which have long been forgotten. The blond Achaians, Gauls and Britons, for instance, were descendants of pure-blooded Æsir. The Nemedians of Irish legendry were the Nemedian Æsir. The Danes were descendants of pure-blooded Vanir; the Goths – ancestors of the other Scandinavian and Germanic tribes, including the Anglo-Saxons – were descendants of a mixed race whose elements contained Vanir, Æsir and Cimmerian strains. The Gaels, ancestors of the Irish and Highland Scotch, descended from pure-blooded Cimmerian clans. The Cymric tribes of Britain were a mixed Nordic-Cimmerian race which preceded the purely Nordic Britons into the isles, and thus gave rise to a legend of Gaelic priority. The Cimbri who fought Rome were of the same blood, as well as the Gimmerai of the Assyrians and Grecians, and Gomer of the Hebrews. Other clans of the Cimmerians adventured east of the drying

inland sea, and a few centuries later, mixed with Hyrkanian blood, returned westward as Scythians. The original ancestors of the Gaels gave their name to modern Crimea.

The ancient Sumerians had no connection with the western race. They were a mixed people, of Hyrkanian and Shemitish bloods, who were not taken with the conquerors in their retreat.

Many tribes of Shem escaped that captivity, and from pure-blooded Shemites, or Shemites mixed with Hyborian or Nordic blood, were descended the Arabs, Israelites, and other straighter-featured Semites. The Canaanites, or Alpine Semites traced their descent from Shemitish ancestors mixed with the Kushites settled among them by their Hyrkanian masters; the Elamites were a typical race of this type. The short, thick-limbed Etruscans, base of the Roman race, were descendants of a people of mixed Stygian, Hyrkanian and Pictish strains, and originally lived in the ancient kingdom of Koth. The Hyrkanians, retreating to the eastern shores of the continent, evolved into the tribes later known as Tatars, Huns, Mongols and Turks.

The origins of other races of the modern world may be similarly traced; in almost every case, far older than they realize, their history stretches back into the mists of the forgotten Hyborian age...

Untitled Synopsis

A squad of Zamorian soldiers, led by the officer Nestor, a Gunderman mercenary, were marching down a narrow gorge, in pursuit of a thief, Conan the Cimmerian, whose thefts from rich merchants and nobles had infuriated the government, of the nearest Zamorian city. Conan had left the city and been followed into the mountains. The walls of the gorge were steep and the gorge-floor grown thickly with high rich grass. Striding through this grass at the head of his men, Nestor tripped over something and fell heavily. It was a rawhide rope stretched there by Conan, and it tripped a spring-pole which started a sudden avalanche that overwhelmed all the soldiers except Nestor, who escaped, bruised, and with his armor scratched and dinted.

Enraged, he followed the trail alone, and emerging into an upland plateau, came into the deserted city of the ancients, where he met Conan. He instantly attacked the Cimmerian, who, after a desperate battle, knocked him senseless with a sword-stroke on his helmet, and went on into the deserted city, thinking him dead. Nestor recovered and followed the Cimmerian.

Conan, meanwhile, had entered the city, clambering over the walls, the gates being locked, and had encountered the monstrous being which haunted the city. This he slew by casting great blocks of stone upon it from an elevation, and then descending and hacking it to pieces with his sword. He had made his way to the great palace which was hewn out of a single monstrous hill of stone in the center of the city. He was seeking an entrance, when Nestor came upon him again, sword in hand, having followed him over the wall. Conan disgustedly advised him to aid him in securing the vast fabulous treasure instead of fighting. After some argument the Gunderman agreed, and they made their way into the palace, eventually coming to the great treasure chamber, where warriors of a by-gone age lay about in life-like positions. The companions made up packages of gold and precious stones, and threw dice to decide which should take a set of perfectly matched uncanny gems which adorned an alter, on which lay a jade serpent, apparently a god. Conan won the toss, and gave all the gold and the other jewels to Nestor. He himself swept up the altar-gems and the jade serpent – but when he lifted it off the altar, the ancient warriors came terrifically to life, and a terrible battle ensued, in which the thieves barely managed to escape with their lives. Heeing their way out of the palace, they were followed by the giant warriors who, upon coming into the sunlight, crumpled into dust. A terrific earthquake shook down the deserted city, and the companions were separated. Conan made his way back to the city, and entering a tavern, where his light-of-love was guzzling wine, spilled the jewels out on the ale-splashed table, in the Maul. To his amazement, they had turned to green dust. He then prepared to examine the jade serpent, who was still in the leather sack. The girl lifted the sack and dropped it with a scream, swearing that something moved inside it. At this instant a magistrate entered with a number of soldiers and arrested Conan, who set his back to a wall, and drew his sword. Before the soldiers could close in, the magistrate thrust his hand into the sack. Nestor had regained the city, with the coins which had not crumpled, and drunk, had told of the exploit. They had sought to arrest him, but drunk, though he was, he had cut his way through and escaped. Now as the magistrate thrust his fat hand into the sack, he shrieked and jerked it forth, a living serpent fast to his fingers. The turmoil which 367

followed gave Conan and the girl an opportunity to escape.

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The Coming of Conan The Cimmerian

Untitled Synopsis

(The Scarlet Citadel)

The story begins with the conclusion of a battle in which king Conan of Aquilonia has been defeated by the armies of Koth and Ophir. Amalrus, king of Ophir sent word to Conan that Strabonus, king of Koth, is ravaging his dominions, and urged Conan to aid him. Conan marched with five thousand horsemen, no archers or infantry, and on the plains of Ophir was met by Strabonus with ten thousand men, knights, archers and slingers, to which was added an Ophirian army of fifteen thousand men. Conan's small army was riddled with arrows, and cut to pieces. Conan himself, the sole survivor, is captured by Strabonus, or rather by his magician, Tsothalanti, an evil mysterious ancient who is the real power in Koth. Tsoth scratches Conan with a stylus dipped in poison extracted from the purple lotus, which induces muscular paralysis. Conan is carried to Khorshemish, Strabonus' capital, where an effort is made to persuade him to abdicate in favor of prince Arpello, an Aquilonian noble secretly in league with Strabonus. He profanely refuses, and is borne into a subterranean tunnel below Tsotha's citadel, chained to the wall and left to his fate. In these tunnels Tsotha works his magic. A dim candle overhead throws a half circle of light about Conan, and soon a gigantic serpent, eighty feet long, glides out of the darkness, rears itself above Conan, and a drop of its poison falls on his naked thigh, making a permanent scar. At this moment, however, a huge black man enters, says that Conan, when a pirate on the coasts of Cush, slew his brother. He prepares to behead Conan, but the serpent glides out of the dark again and seizes him. The keys fall at Conan's feet, and he frees himself. He seeks to escape, but a soldier locks the door from without, though Conan thrusts him through the bars. He finds a rival wizard imprisoned, and frees him, and this wizard summons a huge bird or dragon, on which Conan rides back to Aquilonia, raises an army, and defeats the Kothians.

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The Coming of Conan The Cimmerian

Untitled Synopsis

(Black Colossus)

Shevatas, a Zamorian thief, came to the ruined city of Kuthchemes in the Stygian desert. Once a river ran through it, a tributary to that river which the Stygians call the Styx, the Kothians the Stygus, and the Nemedians the Nilas. But for many centuries the river bed had been dry, and the ruins of Kuthchemes stood up dim and shattered in the moon. There in old times had ruled the magician Thugra Khotan, high priest of Set the Old Serpent, and his tomb still reared its gold-worked marble crest above the ruins. A curse rested on that ancient land, but Shevatas, lusting for the treasure reputed hidden in the tomb, entered by a secret way, unlocking the great door from without and slaying with a sword poisoned in its own venom, the great serpent that guarded the sepulcher. As he entered the gloom-shadowed vault, he screamed as a shadowy shape moved and stirred and heaved up in the darkness he screamed, and then silence fell over the ruins of Kuthchemes.

At that time there was an independant south-Kothian kingdom – the principality of Khoraspar whose young ruler, count Khossa, had defied his king and set up a kingdom of his own. The population was partly Kothian, partly Shemite, ruled over by an aristocratic caste of pure Hyborians. At the time Khossa was a captive in Ophir, whose king was hesitating between accepting a ransom from the Khorasparans, or handing him over to the king of Koth.

Khoraspar, meanwhile, was ruled by the princess Yasmela. Then came word of invasion from the southern desert. A new prophet had risen among the nomadic Shemites, a great magician who called himself Natohk – the Veiled, as he always wore a veil. This prophet worked black magic, and enlisted in his cause a rebel Stygian prince, brother of the king, who had been defeated and driven into the desert. The allies were preparing to march against the Hyborian peoples, and the first country in their path was Khoraspar.

Yamela was haunted by a spectral, shapeless figure with blazing unnatural eyes, which stood in the shadows of her chamber, while her maids slept, and whispered hideous threats and oscenities to her. Terrified and unnerved, she sought an ancient oracle in a subterranean chamber of the palace. She stripped her most beautiful maid and stretched her whimpering on the altar, but did not have courage or cruelty to sacrifice her. But a strange voice whispered out of the air, and bade her select the first man she met, to lead her army. Officers were deserting, bribed by the king of Koth, or terrified by the reports of the veiled magician. The princess went out into the street veiled, and the first man she met was a captain of the mercenaries, Conan the Cimmerian, reeling

along the deserted street, drunk. She doubted the oracle, but brought him into the palace, having to endure a good deal of amorous mauling at his hands. There she revealed herself to him, which startled him. He drew his sword to hack his way to freedom, but she reassured him, and put him in command of the remnants of an army left her by desertion –

a troop of loyal noblemen, a regiment of Shemite archers, and the mercenaries – Gundermen, 370

Aquilonians, Hyperboreans and Nemedians.

They marched to meet the allies where the hills ran down into the desert. A vast fog rolled up from the south, and in it came the thousands of Natohk. But a wind blew it away, and in the battle that followed, Conan and his men were triumphant, by the intercession of an old, old Kothian god, and Conan overthrew Natohk, who was Thugra Khotan. And Conan was triumphant.

Untitled Fragment

The battlefield stretched silent, crimson pools among the still sprawling figures seeming to reflect the lurid red-streamered sunset sky. Furtive figures slunk from the tall grass; birds of prey dropped down on mangled heaps with a rustle of dusky wings. Like harbingers of Fate a wavering line of herons flapped slowly away toward the reed-grown banks of the river. No rumble of chariot-wheel or peal of trumpet disturbed the unseeing stillness. The silence of death followed the thundering of battle.

Yet one figure moved through that wide-strewn field of ruin – pygmy-like against the vast dully crimson sky. The fellow was a Cimmerian, a giant with a black mane and smoldering blue eyes. His girdled loin-cloth and high-strapped sandals were splashed with blood. The great sword he trailed in his right hand was stained to the cross-piece. There was a ghastly wound in his thigh, which caused him to limp as he walked. Carefully yet impatiently he moved among the dead, limping from corpse to corpse, and swearing wrathfully as he did so. Others had been before him; not a bracelet, gemmed dagger, or silver breastplate rewarded his search. He was a wolf who had lingered too long at the blood-letting, while jackals stripped the prey.

Glaring out across the littered plain, he saw no body unstripped or moving. The knives of the mercenaries and camp-followers had been at work. Straightening up from his fruitless quest, he glanced uncertainly afar off across the deepening plain, to where the towers of the city gleamed faintly in the sunset. Then he turned quickly as a low tortured cry reached his ears. That meant a wounded man, living, therefore presumably unlooted. He limped quickly toward the sound, and coming to the edge of the plain, parted the first straggling reeds and glared down at the figure which writhed feebly at his feet.

It was a girl that lay there. She was naked, her white limbs cut and bruised. Blood was clotted in her long dark hair. There was unseeing agony in her dark eyes and she moaned in delirium.

The Cimmerian stood looking down at her, and his eyes were momentarily clouded by what would have been an expression of pity in another man. He lifted his sword to put the girl out of her misery, and as the blade hovered above her, she whimpered again like a child in pain. The great sword halted in midair, and the Cimmerian stood for an instant like a bronze statue. Then sheathing the blade with sudden decision, he bent and lifted the girl in his mighty arms. She struggled blindly but weakly. Carrying her carefully, he limped toward the reed-masked riverbank some distance away.

2.

In the city of Yaralet, when night came on, the people barred windows and bolted doors, and 372

sat behind their barriers shuddering, with candles burning before their household gods until dawn etched the minarets. No watchmen walked the streets, no painted wenches beckoned from the shadows, no thieves stole nimbly through the winding alleys. Rogues, like honest people, shunned the shadowed ways, gathering in foul-smelling dens, or candle-lighted taverns.

From dusk to dawn Yaralet was a city of silence, her streets empty and desolate.

Exactly what they feared, the people did not know. But they had ample evidence that it was no empty dream they bolted their doors against. Men whispered of slinking shadows, glimpsed from barred windows – of hurrying shapes alien to humanity and sanity. They told of doorways splintering in the

night, and the cries and shrieks of humans followed by significant silence; and they told of the rising sun etching broken doors that swung in empty houses, whose occupants were seen no more.

Even stranger, they told of the swift rumble of phantom chariot-wheels along the empty streets in the darkness before dawn, when those who heard dared not look forth. One child looked forth, once, but he was instantly stricken mad and died screaming and frothing, without telling what he saw when he peered from his darkened window.

On a certain night, then, while the people of Yaralet shivered in their bolted houses, a strange conclave was taking place in the small velvet-hung taper-lighted chamber of Atalis, whom some called a philosopher and others a rogue. Atalis was a slender man of medium height, with a splendid head and the features of a shrewd merchant. He was clad in a plain robe of rich fabric, and his head was shaven to denote devotion to study and the arts. As he talked he unconsciously gestured with his left hand. His right arm lay across his lap at an unnatural angle. From time to time a spasm of pain contorted his features, at which time his right foot, hidden under the long robe, would twist back excrucriatingly upon his ankle.

He was talking to one whom the city of Yaralet knew, and praised, as Prince Than. The prince was a tall lithe man, young and undeniably handsome. The firm outline of his limbs and the steely quality of his grey eyes belied the slightly effeminate suggestion of his curled black locks, and feathered velvet cap.

Untitled Synopsis

The setting: The city of Shumballa, in the land of Kush, which lies south of Stygia, in the vast grass lands. It was the capital of Kush, the population of which was composed of black people, brutal and warlike, known as Gallahs; they were ruled by a caste of dusky aristocrats, known as Chagas, who claimed descent from a band of Stygians who long ago wandered southward and set up a kingdom, of which Kush was the remnant. There were only a few hundred of these, but they maintained their position by intrigue and ferocity.

The people: The mad, degenerate king of Kush; his handsome, cruel, sensual sister, Tananda; Tuthmes, a rebellious nobleman of royal blood; Diana, a

Nemedian captive; Agara, a fanatical Gallah witch-finder; Conan the Cimmerian.

The plot: A commander of the Gallah warriors, a black man, having incurred the displeasure of Tananda, was cast into prison, in the upper room of a tall tower. He awoke in the night, to be murdered by a pig-like monster which had scaled the tower-wall and torn the bars from the window. This monster was a survival of a forgotten age, controlled by a dusky adventurer from Kordafan. An hour later the body of the commander was discovered, and a man ran to Tuthmes, to tell him of it. From the marks and prints, it was evident that no human being had killed the commander. Tuthmes told the man that the time was ripe to stir up the Gallahs against the king and his sister, and told him to find Agara, the black witch-finder, and hint to him that Tananda had had the commander murdered. Tuthmes then went upon his roof, to brood over the walled city and the myriad mud huts of the Gallahs spreading into the plains beyond the wall. He, himself, had sent the monster to murder the commander in order to throw suspicion on Tananda, who was the real ruler of Kush. He plotted the overthrow of the ruling dynasty and the making of himself king, with the aid of the Gallahs. But it was a risky task, for the Gallahs had been murmuring, feeling that a pure black king should sit on the throne of Kush. Tuthmes sent for a white woman to present to the king, plotting to effect his ruin through her. His emissary bought a Nemedian girl, Diana, from a Shemitish slave-trader, who had captured her from an Argossean trading vessel.

Shortly thereafter Tananda were riding through the city outside the walls, which was known as Punt, when Agara appeared and stirred up the people against her. Her escort were murdered, and she was dragged from her saddle and stripped naked by the mob, who were about to tear her to pieces when she was rescued by Conan, who had just arrived in Shumballa, a wandering adventurer who had recently been a corsair. She had the captain of the guard speared by his own men, and made Conan captain. Shortly thereafter he put down a rising of the blacks, and 374

was greatly esteemed by the king.

Diana was brought to Tuthmes, who gave her her orders and sent her to the king; but Tananda had her kidnaped, and Conan, seeing her, became vastly interested in her.

Agara, by his magic had discovered Tuthmes' part in the murder of the black commander, and accusing Tuthmes, was by him seized and tortured to death – or so Tuthmes thought. Tuthmes, seeing that he could not overthrow the king as long as Conan lived, sent his Kordafan monster to murder Conan.

Tananda ordered Diana to tell her the details of Tuthmes' plot, but the girl refused, for Tuthmes had frightened her almost into insanity. Tananda whipped her, and Conan entered and put a stop to it. Tanada in a fury threatened him, and he laughed at her, and taking the girl, went to his house.

In the great square of the inner city, a sorcerer was being tortured, while a great mob looked on and jeered. Conan, attacked at his house by the monster, wounded it mortally and pursued it into the square, where it rushed to its master, the Kordafan, and fell dead. The frenzied mob tore the Kordafan to pieces, and then appeared Ageera, who denounced Tuthmes. He was likewise slain by the mob, and then the blacks rose and destroyed Shumballa, and Conan and Diana escaped.

Untitled Draft

Amboola awakened slowly, his senses still sluggish from the wine he had

guzzled the night before. For a muddled moment he could not remember where he was; the moonlight, streaming through the barred window, shone on unfamiliar surroundings. Then he remembered that he was lying in the upper cell of the prison tower where the anger of Tanada, sister to the king of Kush, had consigned him. It was no ordinary cell, for even Tanada had not dared to go too far in her punishment of the commander of the black spearmen which were the strength of Kush's army. There were carpets and tapestries and silk-covered couches, and jugs of wine – he remembered that he had been awakened and wondered why.

His gaze wandered to the square of barred moonlight that was the window, and he saw something that partially sobered him, and straightened his blurred gaze. The bars of that window were bent and buckled, and twisted back. It must have been the noise of their rending that had awakened him. But what could have bent them? And where was whatever had so bent them? Suddenly he was completely sober, and an icy sensation wandered up his spine.

Something had entered through that window; something was in the room with him.

With a low cry he started up on his couch and stared about him; and he froze at the sight of the motionless, statue-like figure that stood at the head of his couch. An icy hand clutched the heart of Amboola which had never known fear. That silent, greyish shape did not move nor speak; it stood there in the shadowy moonlight, misshapen, deformed, its outline outside the bounds of sanity. Staring wildly Amboola made out a pig-like head, snouted, covered with coarse bristles

—but the thing stood upright and its thick, hair-covered arms ended in rudimentary hands –

Amboola shrieked and sprang up – and then the motionless thing moved, with the paralyzing speed of a monster in a nightmare. The black man had one frenzied vision of champing, foaming jaws, of great chisel-like tusks flashing in the moonlight. . . . . presently the moonlight fell on a black shape sprawled amidst the dabbled coverings of the couch on the floor; a greyish, shambling form moved silently across the chamber toward the window whose broken bars leaned out against the stars.

.2.

"Tuthmes!" The voice was urgent; urgent as the fist that hammered on the teak door of the chamber where slept Shumballa's most ambitious nobleman.

“Tuthmes! Let me in! The devil is loose in Shumballa!”

The door was opened, and the speaker burst into the room – a lean, wiry man in a white djebbeh, dark skinned, the whites of his eyes gleaming. He was met by Tuthmes, tall, slender, 376

dusky, with the straight features of his caste.

“What are you saying, Afari?”

Afari closed the door before he answered; he was panting as if from a long run. He was shorter than Tuthmes, and the negroid was more predominant in his features.

“Amboola! He is dead! In the Red Tower!”

“What?” exclaimed Tuthmes. “Tananda dared execute him?”

“No! No, no! She would not be such a fool, surely. He was not executed, but murdered.

Something broke through the bars of his cell, and tore his throat out, and stamped in his ribs, and broke his skull – Set, I have seen many dead men, but never one less lovely in his death than Amboola! Tuthmes, it is the work of some demon! His throat was bitten out, and the prints of the teeth were not like those of a lion or an ape. It was as if they had been made by chisels, sharp as razors!”

“When was this done?”

“Sometime about midnight. Guards in the lower part of the tower, watching the stair that leads up to the cell in which he was imprisoned, heard him cry out, and rushing up the stairs, burst into the cell and found him lying as I have said. I was sleeping in the lower part of the tower as you bade me, and having seen, I came straight here, bidding the guards say naught to anyone.”

Tuthmes smiled and his smile was not pleasant to see.

“Gods and demons work for a bold man,” he said. “I do not think Tananda was fool enough to have Amboola murdered, however much she desired it. The blacks have been sullen, ever since she cast him into prison. She could

not have kept him imprisoned much longer.

“But this matter puts a weapon into our hands. If the Gallahs *think* she did it, so much the better. Each resentment against the dynasty is a weapon for us. Go, now, and strike before the king can learn of it. First take a detachment of black spearmen to the Red Tower and execute the guards for sleeping at their duty. Be sure you take care to do it by my orders. That will show the Gallahs that I have avenged their commander, and remove a weapon from Tananda’s hands. Kill them before she can have it done.

“Then go into Punt and find old Ageera, the witch-finder. Do not tell him flatly that Tananda had this deed done, but hint at it.”

Afari shuddered visibly.

“How can a common man lie to that black devil? His eyes are like coals of red fire that look into depths unnamable. I have seen him make corpses rise and walk, and skulls champ and grind their naked jaws.”

“Don’t lie,” answered Tuthmes. “Simply hint to him your own suspicions. After all, even if a demon *did* slay Amboola, some human summoned it out of the night. Perhaps Tananda is behind this, after all!”

When Afari had left, mulling intensely over what his patron had told him, Tuthmes drew a silken cloak about his other-wise naked limbs and mounting a short, wide staircase of polished mahogany, he came out upon the flat roof of his palace.

Looking over the parapet, he saw below him the silent streets of the inner city of Shumballa, the palaces and gardens, and the great square, into which, at an instant’s notice, a thousand black horsemen could ride, from the courts of adjoining barracks.

Looking further, he saw the great bronze gates, and beyond them, the outer city that men called Punt, to distinguish it from El Shebbeh, the inner city. Shumballa stood in the midst of a great plain, of rolling grass lands that stretched to the horizons, broken only by occasional low hills.

A narrow, deep river, meandering across the grass lands, touched the

straggling edges of the city. El Shebbeh was separated from Punt by a tall and massive wall, which enclosed the palaces of the ruling caste, descendants of those Stygians who centuries ago had come southward to hack out a black empire, and to mix their proud blood with the blood of their dusky subjects. El Shebbeh was well laid out, with regular streets and squares, stone buildings and gardens; Punt was a sprawling wilderness of mud huts; the streets straggled into squares that were squares in name only. The black people of Kush, the Gallahs, the original inhabitants of the country, lived in Punt; none but the ruling caste, the Chagas, dwelt in El Shebbeh, except for their servants, and the black horsemen who served as their guardsmen.

Tuthmes glanced out over that vast expanse of huts. Fires glowed in the ragged squares, torches swayed to and fro in the wandering streets, and from time to time he caught a snatch of song, a barbaric chanting that thrummed with an undertone of wrath or bloodlust. Tuthmes drew his cloak closer about him and shivered.

Advancing across the roof, he halted by a figure which slept in the shadow of a palm growing in the artificial garden. When stirred by Tuthmes' toe, this man awoke and sprang up.

"There is no need for speech," cautioned Tuthmes. "The deed is done. Amboola is dead, and before dawn, all Punt will know he was murdered by Tananda."

"And the – the devil?" whispered the man, shivering.

"Shhh! Gone back into the darkness whence it was invoked. Harken, Shubba, it is time you were gone. Search among the Shemites until you find a woman suitable – a white woman.

Bring her here speedily. If you return within the moon, I will give you her weight in silver. If you fail, I will hang your head from that palm tree."

Shubba prostrated himself and touched his head to the dust. Then rising, he hurried from the roof. Tuthmes glanced again into Punt. The fires seemed to glow more fiercely, somehow, and a drum had begun an ominous monotone. A sudden clamor of bestial yells welled up to the stars.

“They have heard that Amboola is dead,” he muttered, and again he was shaken by a strong shudder.

.3.

Life flowed on its accustomed course in the filth-littered streets of Punt. Giant black men squatted in the doorways of their thatched huts, or lolled on the ground in their shade. Black women went up and down the streets, with water-gourds or baskets of food on their heads.

Children played or fought in the dust, laughing or squalling shrilly. In the squares the black folk chaffered and bargained over plantains, beer, and hammered brass ornaments. Smiths crouched over tiny charcoal fires, laboriously beating out spear blades. The hot sun beat down on all, the sweat, mirth, anger, nakedness and squalor of the black people.

Suddenly there came a change in the pattern, a new note in the timbre. With a clatter of hoofs a group of horsemen rode by, half a dozen men, and a woman. It was the woman who dominated the group. Her skin was dusky, her hair, a thick black mass, caught back and confined by a gold fillet. Her only garment, besides the sandals on her feet, was a short silk skirt girdled at the waist. Gold plates, crusted with jewels, partially covered her dusky breasts. Her features were straight, her bold, scintillant eyes full of challenge and sureness. She rode and handled her steed with ease and certitude, the slim Kushite horse, with the jeweled bridle, the reins of scarlet leather, as broad as a man’s palm and worked with gilt, and her sandalled feet in the wide silver stirrups.

As she rode by work and chatter ceased suddenly. The black faces grew sullen, and the murky eyes burned redly. The blacks turned their heads to whisper in each other’s ears, and the whispers grew to a sullen, audible murmur.

The youth who rode at the woman’s stirrup grew nervous. He glanced ahead, along the winding street, measured the distance to the bronze gates, not yet in view among the flat-topped houses, 379

and whispered: “The people grow ugly, Tananda; it was foolish to ride in Punt.”

“All the black dogs in Kush shall not keep me from my hunting,” answered the woman. “If any seem threatening, ride them down.”

“Easier said than done,” muttered the youth, scanning the silent throng. “They are coming from their houses and massing thick along the street – look there!”

They were entering a broad, ragged square, where the black folk swarmed. On one side of this square stood a house of mud and rough-hewn beams, larger than its neighbors, with a cluster of skulls above the wide doorway. This was the temple of Jullah, which the black folk worshipped in opposition to Set, the Serpent-god worshipped by the Chagas in imitation of their Stygian ancestors. The black folk were thronged in this square, sullenly staring at the horsemen. There was a distinct menace in their attitude, and Tananda, for the first time feeling a slight nervousness, did not notice another rider approaching the square along another street. This rider would have attracted attention in ordinary times, for he was neither Chaga nor Gallah, but a white man, a powerful figure in chain mail and helmet, with a scarlet cloak whipping its folds about him.

“These dogs mean mischief,” muttered the youth at Tananda’s side, half drawing his curved sword. The others, guardsmen, black men like the folk about them, drew closer about her, but did not draw their blades. A low sullen muttering rose louder, though no movement was made.

“Push through them,” ordered Tananda, reining her horse forward. The blacks gave back sullenly before her advance, and suddenly, from the devil-devil house came a lean black figure.

It was old Ageera, clad only in a loin cloth. Pointing his finger at Tananda, he yelled: “There she rides, she whose hands are dipped in blood! She who murdered Amboola!”

His yell was the spark that set off the explosion. A vast roar rose from the mob, and they surged forward, yelling: “Death to Tananda!” In an instant a hundred blacks hand were clawing at the legs of the riders. The youth reined between Tananda and the mob, but a stone, cast from a black hand, shattered his skull. The guardsmen, slashing and hacking, were torn from their steeds and beaten, stamped and stabbed to death. Tananda, beset at last with terror, screamed as her horse reared. A score of wild black figures, men and women, were clawing at her.

A giant grasped her thigh and plucked her from her saddle, full into the eager and furious hands which awaited her. Her skirt was ripped from her body and waved in the air above her, while a bellow of primitive laughter went up from the surging mob. A woman spat in her face and tore off her breastplates, scratching her breasts with her blackened finger-nails. A stone hurled at her

grazed her head. She screamed in frantic fear; a score of brutal hands were tearing at her, threatening to dismember her. She saw a stone clutched in a black hand, while the owner sought to reach her in the press and brain her. Daggers glinted. Only the hindering numbers of 380

the jammed mass kept them from doing her to death instantly. “To the devil-devil house!” went up a roar, followed by a responsive clamor, and Tananda felt herself half carried, half dragged along with the surging mob, grasped by her hair, arms, legs, where ever a black hand could grip. Blows aimed at her in the press were blocked or diverted by the mass; and then there came a shock under which the whole throng staggered as a horsemen on a powerful steed crashed full into the press.

Men went down screaming to be crushed under the flailing hoofs; Tananda got a dizzy glimpse of a figure towering above the press, of a dark scarred face under a steel helmet, of a scarlet cloak unfurled from mighty mailed shoulders, and a great sword lashing up and down, spattering crimson splashes. But from somewhere in the press a spear licked upward, disembowelling the steed. It screamed, plunged and went down, but the rider landed on his feet, smiting right and left. Wildly driven spears and knives glanced from his helmet or the shield on his left arm, while his broadsword cleft flesh and bone, split skulls, scattered brains and spilled entrails into the bloody dust.

Flesh and blood could not stand before it. Clearing a space he stooped, caught up the terrified girl and covering her with his shield, fell back, cutting a ruthless way. He backed into the angle of a wall and dropping her behind him, stood before her, beating back the frothing, screaming onslaught.

Then there was a clatter of hoofs and a regiment of the guardsmen swept into the square, driving the rioters before them. The captain approached, a giant negro resplendant in crimson silk and gold worked harness.

“You were long in coming,” said Tananda, who had risen and regained much of her poise. The captain turned ashy, but before he could turn, Tananda had made a sign that was caught by his men behin him. One of them grasped his spear with both hands and drove it between his captain’s shoulders with such force that the point started out from his breast. The captain sank to his knees, and thrusts from half a dozen more spears finished the task.

Tananda shook back her long black disheveled hair and faced Conan. She was

bleeding from a score of scratches on her breasts and thighs, her locks fell in confusion down her back, and she was as naked as the day she was born; but she stared at him without perturbation or uncertainty, and he gave back her stare, frank admiration in his expression of her cool bearing, and the ripeness of her brown limbs.

“Who are you?” she demanded.

“Conan, a Cimmerian,” he answered.

“What are you doing in Shumballa?”

“I came here to seek my fortune. I was formerly a corsair.”

“Oh!” New interest shone in her dark eyes; she gathered her hair back in her hands. “We have heard tales of you, whom men call Amra the Lion. But if you are no longer a corsair, what are you now?”

“A penniless wanderer.”

She shook her head. “No, by Set! You are captain of the royal guard.”

He glanced casually at the sprawling figure in silk and steel, and the sight did not alter the zest of his sudden grin.

.4.

Shubba returned to Shumballa, and coming to Thuthmes in his chamber where leopard skins carpeted the marble floor, he said: “I have found the woman you desired. A Nemedian girl, captured from a trading vessel of Argos. I paid the Shemitish slave-trader many broad gold pieces.”

“Let me see her,” commanded Thuthmes, and Shubba left the room, returning a moment later leading a girl by the wrist. She was supple, her white skin almost dazzling in contrast with the brown and black bodies to which Thuthmes was accustomed. Her hair fell in a curly rippling gold stream over her white shoulders. She was clad only in a tattered shift. This Shubba removed, leaving her shrinking in complete nudity.

Thuthmes nodded, impersonally.

“She is a fine bit of merchandize. If I were not gambling for a throne, I might be tempted to keep her for myself. Have you taught her Kushite, as I commanded?”

“Aye; in the city of the Shemites, and later daily on the caravan trail, I taught her, and impressed upon her the need of learning by means of a slipper, after the Shemite fashion. Her name is Diana.”

Thuthmes seated himself on a couch, and indicated that the girl should sit cross-legged on the floor at his feet, which she did.

“I am going to give you to the king of Kush as a present,” he said. “You will nominally be his 382

slave, but actually you will belong to me. You will receive your orders regularly, and you will not fail to carry them out. The king is degenerate, slothful, dissipated. It should not be hard for you to achieve complete dominance over him. But lest you might be tempted to disobey, when you fancy yourself out of my reach, in the palace of the king, I will demonstrate my power to you.”

He took her hand and led her through a corridor, down a flight of stone stairs and into a long chamber, dimly lighted. The chamber was divided in equal halves by a wall of crystal, clear as water though some three feet in thickness and of such strength as to have resisted the lunge of a bull elephant. He led [her] to this wall, and made her stand, facing it, while he stepped back.

Abruptly the light went out. She stood there in darkness, her slender limbs trembling with an unreasoning panic; then light began to float in the darkness. She saw a hideous malformed head grow out of the blackness; she saw a bestial snout, chisel-like teeth, bristles – as the horror moved toward her she screamed and turned and ran, frantic with fear, and forgetful of the sheet of crystal that kept the brute from her. She ran full into the arms of Thuthmes in the darkness, and heard his hiss in her ear: “You have seen my servant; do not fail me, for if you do he will search you out where ever you may be, and you can not hide from him.” And when he hissed something else in her quivering ear, she promptly fainted.

Thuthmes carried her up the stairs and gave her into the hands of a black wench with instructions to revive her, to see that she had food and wine, and to bathe, comb, perfume and dress her for her presentation to the king.

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Aquilonia	King Conan	
Cimmeria	King Cumal	Crom
Hyrkania	King	
Hyperborea	King Tomar	
Asgard	King Tyr	Ymir
Vanaheim	King Horsa	Ymir

Cimmeria:
to the south Aquilonia;
to the north Asgard
to the northwest Vanaheim
to the west the Pictish marches;
to the east Hyperborea;
to the south the Aquilonian marches.

Cimmeria gods:
Crom
Badb,
Morrigan,
Macha,
Nemain, war-goddesses
Diancecht
Dagda

Hyperborea:
to the west Asgard;
to the north the barren marches;
to the east Hyrkania;
to the west Cimmeria;
to the south

Aquilonia:
to the east Nemedia, Brythunia, Zamora;
to the north *the Cimmerian marches*
to the west the Pictish marches;
to the south *Brythunia*

The Coming of Conan The Cimmerian

Hyborian Names and Countries

The following is a list of names, countries, kings, etc., that was prepared in March 1932. The two names in italics were typed and later erased by Howard, though they are still visible on the original typescript.

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Cimmerian names:	Aquilonian names:	Hyperborean names:
Eithriall	Prospero	
Eanbotha	Demeter	
Rotheachta	Deucalion	
Giallchadh	Numa	
Cruaidh	Pallantides	
Eamhua	Enarus	
Criomnthan	Dion	
Tuathal	Pomero	

Aesir-Vanir names:

Bragi
Heimdal
Niord
Wulfhere

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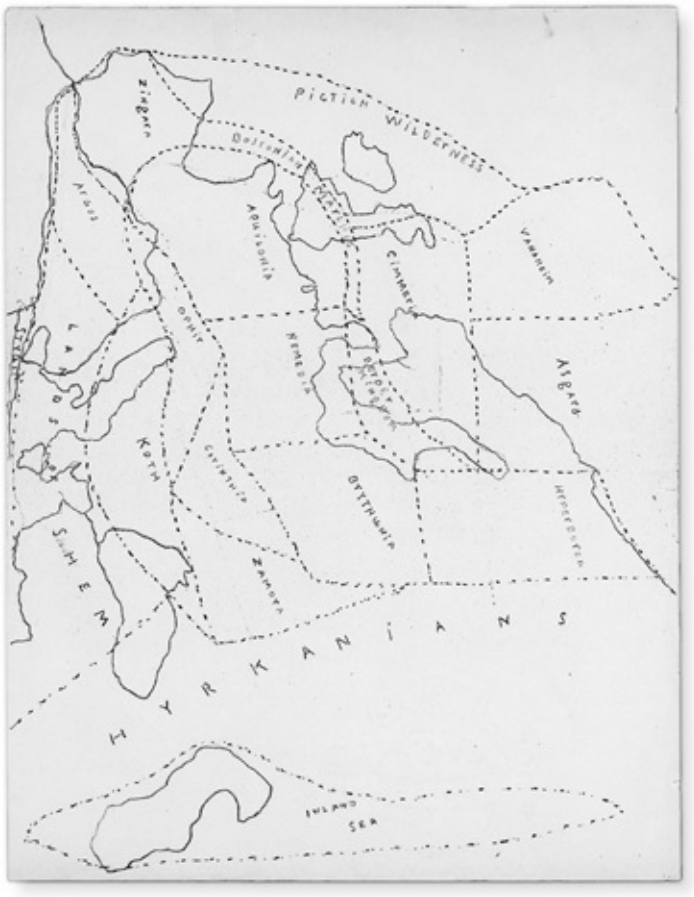

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Hyborian Age Maps

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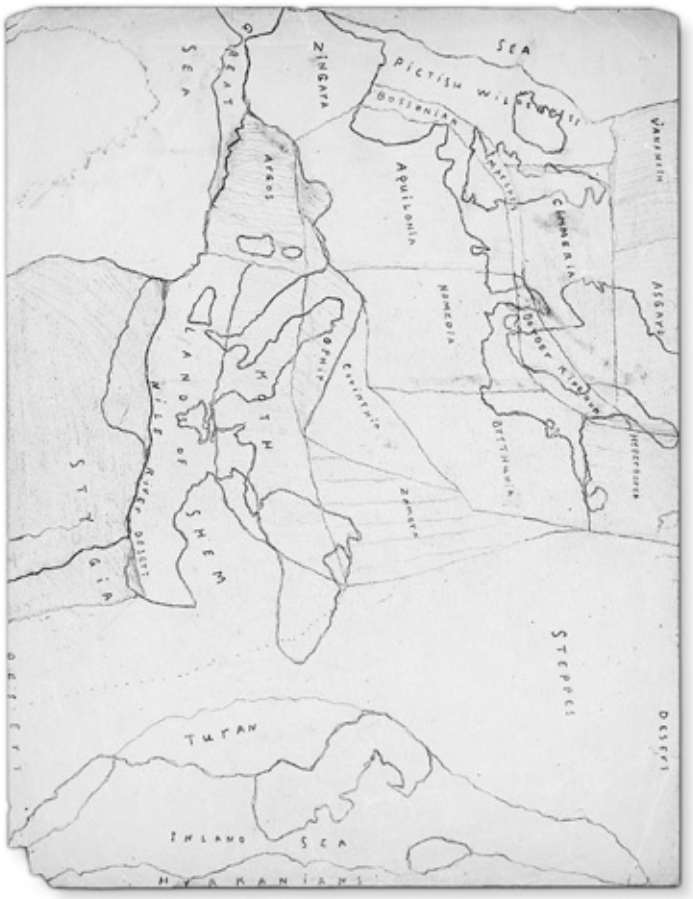

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Appendices

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HYBORIAN GENESIS

Notes on the Creation of the Conan Stories

by Patrice Louinet

In a December 1933 letter to fellow author Clark Ashton Smith, Robert E. Howard recounted the creation of his most famous character, Conan the Cimmerian:

“I know that for months I had been absolutely barren of ideas, completely unable to work up anything sellable. Then the man Conan seemed suddenly to grow up in my mind without much labor on my part and immediately a stream of stories flowed off my pen – or rather off my typewriter – almost without effort on my part. I did not seem to be creating, but rather relating events that had occurred. Episode crowded on episode so fast that I could scarcely keep up with them. For weeks I did nothing but write of the adventures of Conan. The character took complete possession of my mind and crowded out everything else in the way of story-writing.

When I deliberately tried to write something else, I couldn’t do it.”

Writing that his characters and stories came easily to him was customary with Howard, who almost never mentioned unfinished or unsold stories in his correspondence. In the case of the Kull series, for example, only three tales had been published while a dozen others were either left unfinished or rejected. Yet Howard wrote to Lovecraft:

“Thanks for the kind things you said about the Kull stories, but I doubt if I’ll ever be able to write another. The three stories I wrote about that character seemed almost to write themselves, without any planning on my part; there was no conscious effort on my part to work them up.

They simply grew up, unsummoned, full grown in my mind and flowed out on paper from my finger tips.”

In fact, drafts survive for almost every Kull story, indicating that much more work was involved than Howard suggests. How then can we give credence to his intimation that the creation of the Conan stories was virtually a case of automatic writing? Things were not as easy and straightforward as Howard would have Clark Ashton Smith – and us – believe.

In October 1931, Howard completed the first version of a story titled *People of the Dark* and sent it to Clayton Publications’ new magazine, Strange Tales of Mystery and Terror, a direct competitor to Weird Tales. Editor Harry Bates liked the story, but asked for some rewriting.

Howard complied and a few weeks later Bates accepted the story, along with another tale Howard had sent him, *The Cairn on the Headland.*

People of the Dark is a remembrance/reincarnation story. In this first-person narrative, protagonist John O'Brien tells of re-experiencing an episode in the life of one of his previous incarnations, one "Conan of the Reavers," a black-haired Gael who swears by the Celtic deity Crom. It is tempting indeed to see in this Conan a direct prototype for his more famous namesake (and in fact some commentators have done so), were it not for the fact that *People of the Dark* is a first-person remembrance/reincarnation story, while the Conan stories are not.

Or are they?

With the sale of *People of the Dark*, Howard had found a new market – one that, unlike Weird Tales, paid on acceptance. When the money arrived a few weeks later, Howard was overjoyed:

"I finally made Claytons'. I sold them a couple of yarns in a row, and while they kept me waiting awhile for the dough, they paid well when they did pay – $134 for one, and $144 for the other. Short stories too. I hope to gosh I can sell them a long novelet." (REH to Tevis Clyde Smith, ca. February 1932)

Thus in February 1932 Howard was suddenly richer by $278, and it was probably this, rather than any lack of inspiration, that was behind his decision to take a vacation to the southern parts of Texas.

Howard commented to Wilfred Blanch Talman a few weeks later: "I spent a few weeks wandering about in the south part of the state, along the Border mainly, and didn't get any work done during that time – my main occupation being the wholesale consumption of tortillas, enchiladas and Spanish wine."

If he didn't write any stories or letters – probably having left his typewriter behind – Howard at least wrote one poem during his stay: *Cimmeria*. In 1934 Howard sent Emil Petaja a copy of the poem with the comment: "Written in Mission, Texas, February 1932; suggested by the memory of the hill-country above Fredericksburg seen in a mist of winter rain."

We do not know whether Howard already had the idea of Conan by the time the poem was written; certainly both the character and the poem were conceived within a matter of days:

"Conan simply grew up in my mind a few years ago when I was stopping in a little border town on the lower Rio Grande. I did not create him by any conscious process. He simply stalked full grown out of oblivion and set me at work recording the saga of his adventures." (Quoted in Alvin Earl Perry, *A*

Biographical Sketch of Robert E. Howard, 1935) It has been shown that much of Howard's description of the poem's Cimmeria echoes specific passages in Plutarch's *Lives*. Like Howard, Plutarch linked the Celtic Cimbri to the 390

Cimmerians, saying they "live in a dark and woody country hardly penetrable by the sunbeams, the trees are so close and thick, extending into the interior as far as the Hercynian forest."

The poem is more than mere description, however. The first line of the poem – *"I remember"* –

makes it quite clear that we are dealing with the themes of reincarnation and remembrance, as was the case in *People of the Dark*. The protagonist of the latter, John O'Brien, is an American of Irish stock, living in the American Southwest. He thus clearly evokes Howard himself; and if O'Brien can remember his past life as Conan of the Reavers, did Howard believe, or fancy, he also could "remember" having lived in Cimmeria in a past life?

Inquiring further in this autobiographical vein, one is struck by the strong resonance between the descriptions of Cimmeria in the poem and those found in Howard's reminiscences of the land of his birth, Dark Valley, in Palo Pinto County, Texas. He wrote to H.P. Lovecraft, in October 1930:

"I believe, for instance, that the gloominess in my own nature can be partly traced to the surroundings of a locality in which I spent part of my baby-hood. It was a long, narrow valley, lonesome and isolated, up in the Palo Pinto hill country. It was very sparsely settled and its name, Dark Valley, was highly descriptive. So high were the ridges, so thick and tall the oak trees that it was shadowy even in the daytime, and at night it was as dark as a pine forest – and nothing is darker in this world. The creatures of the night whispered and called to one another, faint night-winds murmured through the leaves and now and then among the slightly waving branches could be glimpsed the gleam of a distant star."

Similar imagery combining evil, gnarled trees and an aura of terror can also be found in Howard's poem *The Dweller in Dark Valley*, which concludes with "I go no more in Dark Valley which is the gate of Hell."

Dark Valley and Cimmeria may thus have been very closely linked in Howard's mind. But the

“memory” they evoke is of a very peculiar nature. Howard’s memories of Dark Valley are no less fantastic than John O’Brien’s of his past life: the Howards left Dark Valley when Robert was barely two years old, and he would not see Dark Valley again until the spring of 1931.

Reincarnation can then be seen as a solution to escape one’s biography, just as in Jack London’s *The Star Rover*, a Howard favorite, in which the protagonist is a prisoner who finds relief – and escape – from torture by remembering his past lives. There is a definite pattern here, since Howard completed his first reincarnation story – *The Children of the Night* – the same month he wrote to Lovecraft about Dark Valley, and his second one – *People of the Dark*

– only a few weeks after having seen Dark Valley again.

All these elements were combined in the first Conan story, *The Phoenix on the Sword*, where 391

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the description of Cimmeria echoes Plutarch, Dark Valley and the poems:

“A gloomier land never existed on earth. It is all of hills, heavily wooded, and the trees are strangely dusky, so that even by day all the land looks dark and menacing. As far as a man may see his eye rests on the endless vista of hills beyond hills, growing darker and darker in the distance. Clouds hang always among those hills; the skies are nearly always grey and over-cast.

Winds blow sharp and cold, driving rain of sleet or snow, and moan drearily among the passes and down the valleys. There is little mirth in that land, and men grow moody and strange.

(Unpublished draft a, pp. 9-10)

If Howard could attribute the “gloominess” in his nature to what he thought he remembered of Dark Valley, a similar argument can be put forward to explain Conan’s own moody temperament. While many readers see in Conan a projection of Howard, what they primarily see is Conan as an *idealized* version of Howard: the conquering, irresistible, devil-may-care barbarian. The gloominess inherent to the character has passed largely unnoticed, and understandably so. This feature was rarely mentioned by Howard himself, at least in the published versions of the stories.

In its final form, *The Phoenix on the Sword* opens with a passage from the

“Nemedian Chronicles.” It is in those lines that we first see Conan mentioned; the character himself doesn’t appear until the second chapter of the story. The passage in question reads: “Hither came Conan, the Cimmerian, black-haired, *sullen-eyed*, sword in hand, a thief, a reaver, a slayer, *with gigantic melancholies* and gigantic mirth, to tread the jeweled thrones of the Earth under his sandalled feet” (italics mine). “The Nemedian Chronicles” were only introduced into the story because Farnsworth Wright (the editor of Weird Tales) had asked Howard to rewrite and condense his first two chapters. The short extract’s function was to replace lengthy passages on, respectively, some countries of the Hyborian Age, and some character traits of the Cimmerian.

And if Howard attributed his gloominess to Dark Valley, Conan seems to attribute his own

“gigantic melancholies” to his Cimmerian origin:

“Well,” grinned Prospero, “the dark hills of Cimmeria are far behind you. And now I go. I’ll quaff a goblet of white Nemedian wine for you at Numa’s court.”

“Good,” grunted the king, “but kiss Numa’s dancing girls for yourself only, lest you involve the states!”

His gusty laughter followed Prospero out of the chamber. The carven door closed behind the 392

Poitanian, and Conan turned back to his task. He paused a moment, idly listening to his friend’s retreating footsteps, which fell hollowly on the tiles. And as if the empty sound struck a kindred chord in his soul, a rush of revulsion swept over him. His mirth fell away from him like a mask, and his face was suddenly old, his eyes worn. The unreasoning melancholy of the Cimmerian fell like a shroud about his soul, paralyzing him with a crushing sense of the futility of human endeavor and the meaninglessness of life. His kingship, his pleasures, his fears, his ambitions, and all earthly things were revealed to him suddenly as dust and broken toys. The borders of life shrivelled and the lines of existence closed in about him, numbing him.

Dropping his lion head in his mighty hands, he groaned aloud.

Then lifting his head, as a man looks for escape, his eyes fell on a crystal jar of yellow wine.

Quickly he rose and pouring a goblet full, quaffed it at a gulp. Again he filled and emptied the goblet, and again. When he set it down, a fine warmth stole through his veins. Things and happenings assumed new values. The dark Cimmerian hills faded far behind him. Life was good and real and vibrant after all – not the dream of an idiot god. He stretched himself lazily like a gigantic cat and seated himself at the table, conscious of the magnitude and vital importance of himself and his task. Contentedly, he nibbled his stylus and eyed his map. (*The Phoenix on the Sword*, first submitted draft, see pp. 360-361) When Howard said that "the man Conan seemed suddenly to grow up in my mind without much labor on my part," he was probably telling the truth. What he did not realize was that this act of creation obeyed deep-seated motives: Conan's "gigantic melancholies" echo Howard's

"black moods," as he called them, just as Cimmeria echoes Dark Valley. And just as Dark Valley was a haunting memory for Howard, "a gloomier land" than Cimmeria never existed for Conan.

Howard's Conan, at least in the early phases of his creation, was thus much more a projection of what Howard *was*, than what he *wanted to be*.

The poem *Cimmeria* is not, strictly speaking, part of the Conan canon, but it is the piece of writing that helped bring about the Conan stories: Conan – or Howard – can only "remember"

Cimmeria; it is a terrible land, the mere evocation of which brings unhappy recollections and invites forgetfulness. This is why no Conan story can take place in Cimmeria and why no other Cimmerian is – or could be – ever featured in any of the Conan tales. In *Queen of the Black Coast*, Conan will explain to Bêlit that "[i]n this world men struggle and suffer vainly, finding pleasure only in the bright madness of battle…. Let me live deep while I live; let me know the rich juices of red meat and stinging wine on my palate, the hot embrace of white arms, the mad exultation of battle when the blue blades flame and crimson, and I am content. Let teachers and priests and philosophers brood over questions of reality and illusion. I know this: if life is illusion, then I am no less an illusion, and being thus, the illusion is real to me. I live, I burn with life, I love, I slay, and am content." This is what the Conan series is really about then, a 393

wish to drown oneself in a turbulent life. Conan's intense physical life appears as a desperate attempt to forget Cimmeria and whatever frightful memory is associated with that country.

Perhaps the same can be said of Howard's intense writing activity, which could be seen as an attempt to forget Dark Valley. When Conan is inactive – as is the case at the beginning of *The Phoenix on the Sword* – and reminded of Cimmeria, his first reflex is to seek oblivion and drink his gloominess away. Different solutions to the same problem.

Once *Cimmeria* was written, after having expressed the need to flee that country and to forget it as much as possible, Howard was psychologically ready to compose the first of these action-filled Conan stories.

When Howard returned to Cross Plains in February 1932, there still remained the task of creating what was to become known as the "Hyborian" world.

The reasons behind the invention of the Hyborian Age were probably commercial. Howard's sole market up to 1929 had been Weird Tales, but in the early thirties several new markets opened up to him, notably Oriental Stories and the short-lived Soldiers of Fortune. Howard had an intense love for history and the stories he sold to Oriental Stories rank among his best. At the same time he recognized the difficulties and the time-consuming research work involved in maintaining historical accuracy. By conceiving a universe that was not ours but that *may once have been* ours, by carefully choosing names that resembled our past history, Howard skirted the problem of anachronisms and the need for lengthy explanatory chapters. Lovecraft later criticized him for this, but concluded that: "The only thing to do is to accept the nomenclature as he gives it, wink at the weak spots, and be damned thankful that we can get such vivid artificial legendry." (Letter to Donald Wollheim, used in the introduction to *The Hyborian Age*, 1938)

Howard was perfectly able to come up with imaginary names when he wanted to: the Kull stories that Lovecraft so much admired feature strange-sounding empires such as Zarfhaana, Valusia and Grondar. But by dubbing Howard's method "artificial legendry," Lovecraft had touched upon one of the most important factors presiding over the creation of the Hyborian Age.

Although he is not represented in Howard's library, nor alluded to in his papers and correspondence, there seems a strong likelihood that Howard's conception of the Hyborian Age originates in Thomas Bulfinch's *The Outline of Mythology* (1913), acting as a catalyst that enabled him to coalesce into a coherent whole his literary aspirations and the strong psychological/autobiographical elements underlying the creation of Conan.

Bulfinch (1796-1867) had a keen interest in classical studies and much of his

spare time was spent writing a series of books popularizing classical legends and mythological episodes. *The* 394

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Outline of Mythology combines his three most famous books, *The Age of Fable* (1855), *The Age of Chivalry* (1858) and *Legends of Charlemagne, or Romance of the Middle Ages* (1863).

Between the covers of Bulfinch's books were heroic tales set in various places and epochs of history and legendry, that is to say, the very substance of the Hyborian Age. It is thus not surprising to find that many of the names used in Howard's early conception of his imaginary world are found in Bulfinch, beginning with Conan:

"...the next event of note is the conquest and colonization of Armorica, by Maximis, a Roman general, and Conan, lord of Miniadoc or Denbigh-land, in Wales." (Bulfinch, *The Outline of Mythology*, p. 388)

Of course, Howard was familiar with the name Conan before the inception of the Hyborian series, since he had already used the name for the protagonist in *People of the Dark*. But perhaps this only indicates that Howard had already read or was reading Bulfinch by the time he wrote that story.

As to the country of Conan's birth, Cimmeria, Bulfinch offers a description similar to Howard's:

"Near the Cimmerian country, a mountain cave is the abode of the dull god Somnus. Here Phoebus dares not come, either rising, at midday, or setting. Clouds and shadows are exhaled from the ground, and the light glimmers faintly. The bird of dawning, with crested head, never there calls aloud to Aurora, nor watchful dog, nor more sagacious goose disturbs the silence.

No wild beast, nor cattle, nor branch moved with the wind, nor sound of human conversation, breaks the stillness. Silence reigns there; but from the bottom of the rock the River Lethe flows, and by its murmur invites to sleep." (Bulfinch, pp. 71-72)

Some commentators have noted the closeness of description between Howard's Cimmeria and Herodotus' description of this country; this could well have come from Bulfinch, who drew some of his material from Herodotus. Bulfinch adds: "The earliest inhabitants of Britain are supposed to have been a branch of that great family known in history by the designation of

Celts. Cambria, which is a frequent name for Wales, is thought to be derived from Cymri, the name which the Welsh traditions apply to an immigrant people who entered the island from the adjacent continent. This name is thought to be identical with those of Cimmerians and Cimbri, under which the Greek and Roman historians describe a barbarous people, who spread themselves from the north of the Euxine over the whole of Northwestern Europe" (p. 529). In March 1932, precisely at the time he was writing the first Conan tales, Howard echoed Bulfinch, writing to Lovecraft that "Most authorities consider the Cimbri were Germans, of course, and they probably were, but there's a possibility that they were Celtic, or of mixed Celtic and German blood, and it gratifies my fancy to protray [sic] them as Celts, anyway."

These elements alone are far from conclusive, but are sufficient to show that Howard may have been using Bulfinch's recountings of widespread legends as a handy reference for his own Hyborian world. Nowhere is this more evident than in the first Conan tale, *The Phoenix on the Sword*.

Around May of 1929, Howard wrote two drafts of a Kull story entitled *By This Axe I Rule!* The story was submitted to – and rejected by – Argosy and Adventure. Nearly three years later, in March 1932, Howard salvaged this story from the unpublished files and rewrote it as *The Phoenix on the Sword*. It is impossible to ascertain exactly what was modified between the last draft of the Kull story and the first draft of the Conan one, since the final draft of *By This Axe I Rule!* has not come to us (the published text is that of the first – and only extant – draft). At any rate the physical description of Kull was carried over to Conan, with the notable exception of the color of his eyes: grey for the Atlantean, blue for the Cimmerian. The Conan version of the story also dropped the love interest of the Kull tale and replaced it with a supernatural element; understandably so since the Conan story was aimed at a fantasy market while the Kull version had been intended for general fiction magazines. In the three years that had elapsed since the writing of the Kull story, Howard had begun corresponding with Howard Phillips Lovecraft.

Many of Howard's weird stories from the year 1931 were attempts at writing stories in Lovecraft's style. By the end of the year, however, Howard had successfully assimilated the influence, and he was now able to include Lovecraftian elements in his stories without aping his Providence colleague.

The Lovecraftian monster of this story is a perfect example, as is the fact that the published version's discreet reference to the "Nameless Old Ones" replaced the first draft's "Cthulhu, Tsathogua, Yog-Sothoth, and the Nameless Old Ones."

In the Kull story, the names of the conspirators were Ascalante, Gromel, Volmana, Kaanub and Ridondo. In the Conan version, all names were retained except Kaanub and Ridondo. The replacement of Kaanub by Dion is easily explained, since the former was mentioned in the Kull stories Howard had sold to Weird Tales. However, this was not the case with Ridondo. So why change the name to Rinaldo? Rinaldo, in fact, appears in Bulfinch: "Rinaldo was one of the four sons of Aymon, who married Aya, the sister of Charlemagne. Thus Rinaldo was nephew to Charlemagne and cousin of Orlando" (p. 660). Not only are there lengthy passages about Rinaldo in Bulfinch, but the fact that he was not always in favor at the court of his king furnishes enough explanation for Howard's change from Ridondo to Rinaldo: the two Rinaldos share ambivalent feelings toward their respective kings.

It seems likely that all the names introduced between the Kull and the Conan version, with the notable exceptions of Prospero and Publius (undoubtedly derived from Shakespeare) came from Bulfinch:

"Hyborea/Hyboria" and "Aquilonia" (The word "Hyborian" was not introduced by Howard until the last draft of his essay *The Hyborian Age* ; the original word was "Hyborean"): "When 396

so many less active agencies were personified, it is not to be supposed that the winds failed to be so. They were Boreas or Aquilo, the north wind." Since "Hy" is Irish for "country of," and given Howard's interest in things Celtic, Hyboria would thus be "the country of Borea" or "the country of the north wind."

"King Numa" : "It was said that Numa, the second king of Rome...."

"Epemiteus/Epemitreus" (in the first draft of *Phoenix*, this character was named Epemiteus):

"Prometheus was one of the Titans, a gigantic race, who inhabited the earth before the creation of man. To him and his brother Epimetheus was committed the office of making man, and providing him and all other animals with the faculties necessary for their preservation."

“Hyperborea”: “The northern portion of the earth was supposed to be inhabited by a happy race named the Hyperboreans, dwelling in everlasting bliss and spring beyond the lofty mountains whose caverns were supposed to send forth the piercing blasts of the north wind, which chilled the people of Hellas (Greece). Their country was inaccessible by land or sea. They lived exempt from disease or old age, from toils and warfare.”

“Hyrkania”: “...no less a personage than the Prince of Hyrcania….”

“Brythunia and the Picts”: “...a history of Britain, brought over from the opposite shore of France, which, under the name of Brittany, was chiefly peopled by natives of Britain, who from time to time emigrated thither, driven from their own country by the inroads of the Picts and Scots.” (Of course, Howard was well aware of the Picts before reading Bulfinch.)

“Stygia”: as such, several times.

“Thoth-amon”: “The Egyptians acknowledged as the highest deity Amun, afterwards called Zeus, or Jupiter Ammon.” (The name “Thoth” doesn’t appear in Bulfinch.)

“Boethian/Bossonian Marches” (“Boethian Marches” was used in the first draft): “fleet and army assembled in the port of Aulis in Boeotia.”

“Zamora”: as “Zumara.”

The second Conan story completed by Howard, *The Frost-Giant’s Daughter*, borrowed more than names from Bulfinch. The idea for the plot probably emerged while Howard was writing *The Phoenix on the Sword*, which would account for the remarks about Conan’s days with the Vanir and the Æsir found in that story:

“Asgard and Vanaheim,” Prospero scanned the map. “By Mitra, I had almost believed those lands to be fabulous.”

Conan grinned fiercely and involuntarily touched the various scars on his clean shaven face.

“By Mitra, had you spent your youth on the northern borders of Cimmeria,

you had realized they are anything but fabulous! Asgard lies to the north, and Vanaheim to the northwest, of Cimmeria, and there is continual war along the borders. These people are tall and fair and blue-eyed, and of like blood and language, save that the Aesir have yellow hair and the Vanir, red hair. They are great ale drinkers and fighters; they fight all day and drink ale and roar their wild songs all night. Their chief god is the frost-giant Ymir, and they own no over-king, but each tribe has its war-chief." (Draft a, p. 9)

The following names are found in both Howard's story and Bulfinch: Asgard, Vanaheim, Ymir, Horsa, Heimdal, Bragi, and even the Frost-giants. While Howard had already written many stories featuring northern characters, the inspiration here was much more than the names: the basic plot of *The Frost-Giant's Daughter* can be found in its entirety in Bulfinch. For Howard's Atali, the frost-giant's daughter, owes more to Atalanta than just her name. As Bulfinch tells us:

The innocent cause of so much sorrow was a maiden whose face you might truly say was boyish for a girl, yet too girlish for a boy. Her fortune had been told, and it was to this effect:

"Atalanta, do not marry; marriage will be your ruin." Terrified by this oracle, she fled the society of men, and devoted herself to the sports of the chase. To all suitors (for she had many) she imposed a condition which was generally effectual in relieving her of their persecutions –

"I will be the prize of him who shall conquer me in the race; but death must be the penalty of all who try and fail." In spite of this hard condition some would try. (Bulfinch, pp. 141-142) Howard combined this basic outline with yet another reworked Bulfinch legend, that of Daphne and Apollo, but he reversed the roles. Whereas Apollo was a god and Daphne a mortal, Howard made Atali a goddess and Conan a mortal. In the original, Cupid had struck Apollo with an arrow to excite love for Daphne, but struck her with an arrow to cause her to find love repellent. Howard kept the idea of the love-maddened Apollo (rather a lust-maddened Conan) pursuing the girl until she invokes the aid of her divine father: Apollo loved her, and longed to obtain her […] He followed her; she fled, swifter than the wind, and delayed not a moment at his entreaties. […] The nymph continued her flight, and left his plea half uttered. And even as she fled she charmed him. The wind blew her garments, and her unbound hair streamed loose behind her. The god grew impatient to find his wooings 398

thrown away, and, sped by Cupid, gained upon her in the race. It was like a hound pursuing a hare, with open jaws ready to seize, while the feebler animal darts forward, slipping from the very grasp. So flew the god and the virgin – he on the wings of love, and she on those of fear.

The pursuer is the more rapid, however, and gains upon her, and his panting breath blows upon her hair. Her strength begins to fail, and, ready to sink, she calls upon her father, the river god:

"Help me, Peneus! open the earth to enclose me, or change my form, which has brought me into this danger…" (Bulfinch, pp. 20-22; compare with Howard's: "Oh, my father, save me!") It seems Howard was telling Clark Ashton Smith the truth when he wrote that, "Episode crowded on episode so fast that I could scarcely keep up with them. For weeks I did nothing but write of the adventures of Conan." After Howard sent *The Phoenix on the Sword* and *The Frost-Giant's Daughter* to Farnsworth Wright in early March 1932, he didn't even wait for them to be accepted or rejected before he wrote another story, *The God in the Bowl*.

The God in the Bowl took three drafts before Howard was satisfied with it. This time Howard probably borrowed his names from Plutarch's *Lives*, some of which had already been jotted down in a list of names and countries Howard had prepared while writing *The Phoenix on the Sword* (see Appendix, p. 417). Compare the names from Plutarch with their equivalent in Howard's story: Oenarus (Enarus), Demetrius (Demetrio – Howard used Demetrius in error in three instances in the first draft of the story), Postumius (Postumo), Dion (Dionus), Areus (Arus), Deucalion (Deucalion in the page of notes, Kallian [Publico] in the story) and Petinus (as [Aztrias] Petanius). The story takes place in Numalia (Numantia appears in Plutarch), and the Palian Way undoubtedly corresponds to the Appian Way. As had been the case with *Phoenix*, it seems the "influence" was limited to the borrowing of those names.

Howard was writing these stories in very quick succession and his page of names and countries had become obsolete. Howard, probably sensing that this new series had potential, began writing what would become *The Hyborian Age*. The essay required four successive versions before he was satisfied with the result. Starting out as a brief two-page outline, it soon developed into an 8,000 word essay, enriched with each successive version.

Over the years, the idea that Howard had written *The Hyborian Age* first and the stories later has become widespread, no doubt because of Howard's own

ambiguous phrasing on the subject: “When I began writing the Conan stories a few years ago, I prepared this ‘history’ of his age and the peoples of that age, in order to lend him and his sagas a greater aspect of realness.”

While there is no denying that Howard had some ideas as to what his Hyborian world was to become, there was no attempt at systematization until after the first three stories were written.

The country of Zingara and the Sea of Vilayet (as the “inland sea”) were introduced with the first draft, Ophir and Gunderland in the second, and Corinthia, Argos, Ophir and Turan in the 399

third. Two very similar maps were then prepared (see pp. 421-423) as well as the short *Notes on Various Peoples of the Hyborian Age* (see pp. 375-378).

Of the many countries first described in these essays and maps, several would never actually be used or mentioned in the rest of the series. The term “Border Kingdom,” for instance, only appears in these documents, and others were simply discarded: “South of Stygia are the vast black kingdoms of the Amazons, the Kushites, the Atlaians, and the hybrid empire of Zimbabwe.” Only the Kushites would make it to the series. In 1936, Howard would explain his position in a letter to P. Schuyler-Miller:

“I’ve never attempted to map the southern and eastern kingdoms, though I have a fairly clear outline of their geography in my mind. However, in writing about them I feel a certain amount of license, since the inhabitants of the western Hyborian nations were about as ignorant concerning the peoples and countries of the south and east as the people of medieval Europe were ignorant of Africa and Asia. In writing about the western Hyborian nations I feel confined within the limits of known and inflexible boundaries and territories, but in fictionizing the rest of the world, I feel able to give my imagination freer play. That is, having adopted a certain conception of geography and ethnology, I feel compelled to abide by it, in the interests of consistency. My conception of the east and south is not so definite or so arbitrary.”

Howard remained quite faithful to his conception of the Hyborian world as defined in his essay. As he wrote more and more Conan stories, countries or regions were added to it. This did not prevent him, however, from recycling names first used in a discarded story. For example, the name “Punt” was first used in an unfinished story for a city, but was used in later stories as the name

of a country.

Just as he had completed these documents, Howard wrote an outline for a new Conan story (see p. 399), in which the Cimmerian was to operate as a thief in the Maul of a Zamorian city.

Howard decided not to flesh out this tale, possibly due to news received from Farnsworth Wright. In a letter dated March 10, 1932, Wright wrote:

"Dear Mr. Howard: I am returning 'The Frost Giant's Daughter' in a separate envelope, as I do not much care for it. But 'The Phoenix of [sic] the Sword' has points of real excellence. I hope you will see your way clear to touch it up and resubmit it. It is the first two chapters that do not click. The story opens rather uninterestingly, it seems to me, and the reader has difficulty in orienting himself. The first chapter ends well, and the second chapter begins superbly; but after King Conan's personality is well established, the chapter sags from too much writing. I think the very last page of the whole story might be re-written with advantage; because it seems a little weak after the stupendous events that precede it."

Given the work Howard was putting into building his new series, the news must have dealt him a temporary blow, the more so since *The God in the Bowl*, undoubtedly sent a few days after 400

the first two stories, would be rejected too.

The God in the Bowl was relegated to the archives. Howard thought highly enough of *The Frost Giant's Daughter*, however, to give the story to a fanzine a few months later – with Conan's name replaced by Amra – under the title *The Frost-King's Daughter*. (In the meantime, *The Frost-King's Daughter* may have been unsuccessfully submitted to another magazine.) By the time *The Frost-King's Daughter* was published, in 1934, readers familiar with the Conan stories wouldn't fail to note that the name Amra was mentioned in *The Scarlet Citadel* (published in Weird Tales for January 1933) as an alias for Conan.

Howard then reworked *The Phoenix on the Sword* according to Wright's suggestions, eliminating the lengthy descriptive passages of the Hyborian world and recycling his country-names into the newly-created "Nemedian Chronicles." A few days later Howard sent off the new version, and by April 1932 he could report to Lovecraft:

“I’ve been working on a new character, providing him with a new epoch – the Hyborian Age, which men have forgotten, but which remains in classical names, and distorted myths. Wright rejected most of the series, but I did sell him one – ‘The Phoenix on the Sword’ which deals with the adventures of King Conan the Cimmerian, in the kingdom of Aquilonia.”

By “most of the series,” Howard meant *The Frost-Giant’s Daughter* and *The God in the Bowl*.

After having completed and sent the revised version of *The Phoenix on the Sword*, Howard immediately proceeded to write a new Conan story, one that would be the first to really integrate his new conception of the Hyborian world, and thus to introduce it to the reader. The idea for *The Tower of the Elephant* was likely born as Howard was revising *The Phoenix on the Sword* (whose final draft mentions “Zamora with its dark-haired women and towers of spider-haunted mystery”). The new tale was also born on the ashes of the never fleshed-out synopsis mentioned above, in which (as in *Tower*) Conan is a thief in the Maul of a Zamorian city. The early phase of the creation of Conan was over. Howard now had a firm grasp not only of his character, but also of the universe he was operating in.

The Tower of the Elephant is one of the best Conan stories, in which Howard masterfully inserted as many elements of the Hyborian world as was possible. He opened his story in a tavern of ill-repute and peopled it with as many representatives of the Hyborian nationalities –

excepting, of course, another Cimmerian – as he could:

“Native rogues were the dominant element – dark-skinned, dark-eyed Zamorians, with daggers at their girdles and guile in their hearts. But there were wolves of half a dozen outland nations there as well. There was a giant Hyperborean renegade, taciturn, dangerous, with a broadsword strapped to his great gaunt frame – for men wore steel openly in the Maul. There was a 401

Shemitish counterfeiter, with his hook nose and curled blue-black beard. There was a bold-eyed Brythunian wench, sitting on the knee of a tawny-haired Gunderman – a wandering mercenary soldier, a deserter from some defeated army. And the fat gross rogue whose bawdy jests were causing all the shouts of mirth was a professional kidnapper come up from distant Koth to teach woman-stealing to Zamorians who were born with more knowledge of the art than he could ever attain.”

In a later portion of the tale, Howard had Yag-kosha explain to Conan – and the reader – the most important phases of the creation of the Hyborian world:

"We saw men grow from the ape and build the shining cities of Valusia, Kamelia, Commoria, and their sisters. We saw them reel before the thrusts of the heathen Atlanteans and Picts and Lemurians. We saw the oceans rise and engulf Atlantis and Lemuria, and the isles of the Picts, and the shining cities of civilization. We saw the survivors of Pictdom and Atlantis build their stone age empires, and go down to ruin, locked in bloody wars. We saw the Picts sink into abysmal savagery, the Atlanteans into apedom again. We saw new savages drift southward in conquering waves from the arctic circle to build a new civilization, with new kingdoms called Nemedia, and Koth, and Aquilonia and their sisters. We saw your people rise under a new name from the jungles of the apes that had been Atlanteans. We saw the descendants of the Lemurians who had survived the cataclysm, rise again through savagery and ride westward, as Hyrkanians. And we saw this race of devils, survivors of the ancient civilization that was before Atlantis sank, come once more into culture and power – this accursed kingdom of Zamora."

Howard sent the new story late in the month, and he could report to Lovecraft a few days later that:

"Wright took another of the Conan the Cimmerian series, 'The Tower of the Elephant,' the setting of which is among the spider-haunted jeweled towers of Zamora the Accursed, while Conan was still a thief by profession, before he came into the kingship."

In the sole month of March 1932, Howard, "without much labor on [his] part," had written an estimated 250 pages of Conan material, to sell only two stories.

It appears that Howard did not work on Conan for the next several weeks. Presumably he did not wish to deluge Weird Tales with more Conan stories until those which had been accepted were scheduled. But the Hyborian world was quite present in Howard's mind.

One of the elements from the prototypical phase of the series had apparently disappeared: the remembrance/reincarnation theme that had been present in *People of the Dark*, *Cimmeria* and the early drafts of *The Phoenix on the*

Sword. This was surprising given the importance we have ascribed to this theme in the very inception of what was to become the Conan series. In fact, as he had just completed the first Conan tales, Howard mentioned to Lovecraft that he was also "working on a mythical period of prehistory when what is now the state of Texas was a great plateau, stretching from the Rocky Mountains to the sea – before the country south of the Cap-rock broke down to form the sloping steppes which now constitute the region." The story alluded to here was *Marchers of Valhalla*, in its first version. The story would be rejected in May by Farnsworth Wright. *Marchers of Valhalla* was the first of the James Allison stories.

Allison is a crippled Texan of the post-oak country, condemned to a drab life, who acquires the ability to relive his past, heroic, lives. In October 1933, Howard wrote to Clark Ashton Smith that *The Garden of Fear* – another James Allison story – was "dealing with one of my various conceptions of the Hyborian and post-Hyborian world." To fully understand the implication, Smith would have had to be familiar with one of the drafts for *Marchers of Valhalla*, where Ishtar's dialogue was quite different than in the published version of the tale:

"Listen, and I will tell you!" she cried, hitching toward me on her knees and catching at the skirt of my tunic. "Only listen, and then grant me the little thing I ask! I am Ishtar, a daughter of a king in dim Lemuria, which the sea gulped so long ago. Thoth-amon, the sorcerer of Stygia, hated my father, and to spite him, he put the curse on me of Life ever-lasting!

"Oh, man, I have lived for so many, weary, weary ages! I saw Atlantis and Lemuria sink below the waves, and the rise of the Hyborians. But for over a thousand years I have dwelt in this domed chamber, beneath the golden dome of the temple of Khemu, whither a galley of distant Khitai bore me…" (unpublished draft)

The "Hyborian Age" was thus on the verge of becoming much more than just Conan's world, and would have been included in the James Allison stories. Somewhat later, Howard also began, but didn't complete, a story set in modern times that mentions the "Hyborian Age" (fragment published in The Howard Collector, 1979), and sold *The Haunter of the Ring*, yet another reincarnation story, which mentions Thoth-amon, his ring and Stygia.

In the spring of 1932, Howard began work on *The Scarlet Citadel* (Weird Tales, January 1933).

The story was the second to concern Conan's reign as king of Aquilonia, but

it had much more of the medieval to it than *The Phoenix on the Sword*. *The Scarlet Citadel* is the first Conan story to display Howard's interest in history and epic. It seems probable that an anecdote in Bulfinch furnished the idea for the beginning of the story, in which Conan and his army are led to an ambush by supposed allies. While describing the Battle of Roncesvalles, Bulfinch writes: 403

"Marsilius began by lamenting, not as to the ambassador, but as to the friend, the injuries which Charles had done him by invading his dominions, charging him with wishing to take his kingdom from him, and give it to Orlando; till at length he plainly uttered his belief that, if that ambitious paladin were but dead, good men would get their rights. Gan […] exclaimed: "Every word you utter is truth; die he must, and die also must Oliver, who struck me that foul blow at court. […] I have planned everything,– I have settled everything already with their besotted master. Orlando will come to your borders,– to Roncesvalles,– for the purpose of receiving the tribute. Charles will await him at the foot of the mountains. Orlando will bring but a small band with him: you, when you meet him, will have secretly your whole army at your back. You surround him, and who receives tribute then?" (Bulfinch, p. 801) From this brief passage, Howard built an epic that owed nothing to Bulfinch. Why borrow when the whole purpose of the creation of the Hyborian world was precisely to be free from historical contraints? Howard's readings were springboards from which he crafted tales that were entirely his: who could detect, for instance, that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The White Company* and *Sir Nigel* very probably provided Howard with some background data for his story from a reading of the published version of *The Scarlet Citadel* ? In a letter received August 9, 1932 by Lovecraft, Howard casually mentioned: "Like Samkin Aylward, I warm to a man with the bitter drop in him." Samkin Aylward is a character in Doyle's novels, both books taking place in Medieval England and France during the Hundred Years War. In the published version of *The Scarlet Citadel*, there is a cryptic mention of "the land torn with the war of the barons." In the first drafts of the story, the passage was much more detailed: "The aristocrats had long memories; they would remember rich merchants who gave freely to Conan's cause, they would remember the sturdy yeomen with which Conan had broken the power of the feudal lords in the War of the Barons" (from draft b, pp. 29-30). The reason for the toning down is simple: there was an historical "Barons' War" in England, in the thirteenth Century, alluded to by Doyle in Sir Nigel. A similar example is found in the mention that "six rich merchants, sent as a delegation of protest, were seized and their heads slashed off without ceremony." (*The Scarlet Citadel*, p. 108.)

This is probably derived from the famous historical episode of the six burghers of Calais, though these actually escaped death. The fact is mentioned by Doyle:

“Bethink you how he swore to hang the six burghers of this very town [i.e. Calais], and yet he pardoned them.” Much of the Howard’s story’s medieval terminology, notably that for armor and weapons, may very well have come from Doyle’s novels.

The Scarlet Citadel was the first story to mention the Hyborian Age’s equivalent of the African coasts, in a scene in which a jailer recognizes Conan as “Amra”: “the name by which the Cimmerian had been known to the Cushites in his piratical days – Amra, the Lion.” Thus in the same way that *The Tower of the Elephant* followed the mention of Zamora in *Phoenix on the Sword*, the next Conan story would take place in an exotic region of the Hyborian world.

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The Coming of Conan The Cimmerian

Completed around August 1932, *Queen of the Black Coast* is one of the more famous Conan stories, and understandably so. Its most interesting feature is of course the pirate Bêlit (whose name was originally Tameris in the first draft), the first female character of any importance to appear in a Conan story. It took four successive drafts for Howard to complete this story and it seems, judging from the drafts, that he had little idea as to how the story would end. He probably understood that the real force of the tale lay not in its plot, but in the strange relationship binding Conan and Bêlit.

In the first draft of the story, Bêlit (Tameris) explicitly states that she has kept herself a virgin:

“I am Tameris, queen of the Black Coast, and I have known the embraces of no man! No man, black or white, can say he had the gift of my lips and my love! Always I have kept myself inviolate for the man I knew I would some day meet” (draft a, p. 11).

The relations between Conan and Bêlit, though of an amorous nature, are far from the stock pulp-fiction romance. Throughout the story, and especially so in the early drafts, a very strong undercurrent of sadism pervades their exchanges. To the published version’s “Take me and crush me with your fierce love” corresponds the earlier drafts’ “Take me and crush me and bruise

me with your fierce love!” This is far from being an isolated example. In the third draft, just following the line of dialogue “‘Very well,’ she said absently, hardly heeding him. ‘I’ll get the loot aboard’ ” were found the following lines:

“Conan glared at her narrowly, aware of a dim upsurging jealousy, centering on those murky jewels on her ivory bosom. He had a primitive impulse to tear them from her throat and cast them into the river. And for the first time, he felt an impulse to lock his iron fingers in his companion’s black locks and subject her person to moderate violence” (draft c, p. 22).

We do not know whether it was Howard who toned down the story in his final draft or if this was the result of Farnsworth Wright’s editorial interference. A comparison of the few later Conan stories for which definitive typescripts survive and their published versions shows that Wright systematically censored lines of dialogue that he deemed too “sensual.”

It was also in this fierce and grim story that Howard let the reader have a glimpse of the Cimmerian’s philosophy of life, in a discussion on religion and life after death between Conan and Bêlit:

“What of your own gods? I have never heard you call on them.”

“Their chief is Crom. He dwells on a great mountain. What use to call on him? Little he cares if men live or die. Better to be silent than to call his attention to you; he will send you dooms, not fortune! He is grim and loveless, but at birth he breathes power to strive and slay into a man’s soul. What else shall men ask of the gods?”

[…]

“There is no hope here or hereafter in the cult of my people … In this world men struggle and suffer vainly, finding pleasure only in the bright madness of battle; dying, their souls enter a gray misty realm of clouds and icy winds, to wander cheerlessly throughout eternity.”

From May 7 to July 23, 1932, Collier’s Magazine ran the serialization of Sax Rohmer’s latest novel, *The Mask of Fu Manchu*. It was published in book form a few weeks later, and made into a movie before the year was over. Rohmer had long been a favorite of Howard, whose library contained many of

his books, so surely he noticed the new story, especially under Collier's particularly attractive cover. *The Mask of Fu Manchu* details the Chinese mastermind's failed attempt to revive the cult of Mokanna, "the Hidden One, sometimes called the Veiled Prophet":

"(Mokanna), about 770 A.D., set himself up as an incarnation of God, and drew to his sect many thousands of followers. He revised the Koran. His power became so great that the Caliph Al Mahdi was forced to move against him with a considerable army. Mokanna was a hideous creature. His features were so mutilated as to be horrible to see…. He and his staff poisoned themselves in the hour of defeat. From that day to this, no one has known where he was buried" (*The Mask of Fu Manchu*, chapter 4).

Rohmer's novel opens just after Mokanna's tomb in Khorassan has been brought to light, the relics secured, and the tomb destroyed in a measure of precaution against fanatics. However,

"An outcry – 'Mokanna has arisen' – swept through Afghanistan… None of the tribesmen who, as you suspect, and rightly, still hold the Mokanna tradition had any idea that you or any human influence had been concerned with the eruption which reduced a lonely shrine to a dusty hollow."

From these tantalizing premises, Rohmer built an atmospheric "yellow peril" detective novel revolving around Fu Manchu's vain attempts to secure the relics so he could pose as Mokanna reincarnated. Howard very probably saw the unexploited potential of Rohmer's novel, and began an epic story that would recount the successful reincarnation of a "veiled prophet" of the desert, whose first task would be to unite the desert clans in a war of conquest that would soon threaten the Hyborian (i.e. Indo-European) nations. Rohmer was bound by imperatives of historical verisimilitude which Howard's Hyborian Age could ignore, and thus was born *Black Colossus* :

"There were rumors from the desert that lies east of Stygia, far south of the Kothian hills. A new prophet had arisen among the nomads. Men spoke of tribal war, of a gathering of vultures 406

in the southeast, and a terrible leader who led his swiftly increasing hordes to victory. The

[Stygian] priests were making magic to fight that of the desert sorcerer, whom men called Natohk, the Veiled One; for his features were always masked."

In Rohmer's novel Mokanna's tomb lies in "Khorassa," while Howard's story begins in

"Khoraja"; in his synopsis for the story, this was "Khoraspar."

The background of Howard's tale was probably derived from his then-current readings on Mesopotamian history. The portrayal of Bêlit (an Assyrian name) in *Queen of the Black Coast* already attests to Howard's interest in the subject, which would ultimately be fully expressed in his late 1932 story *The House of Arabu*.

As was the case with *Queen of the Black Coast, Black Colossus* was originally intended to contain some flagellation scenes: in the synopsis, Howard writes that Yasmela "stripped her most beautiful maid and stretched her whimpering on the altar, but did not have courage or cruelty to sacrifice her," and in the first draft wrote, "On each birthday, up to her twentieth, Yasmela had been laid across the knees of the image in Ishtar's temple and birched soundly by a priestess to teach her humbleness in the sight of the goddess" (draft a, p. 13).

Even in its published version the story contains many sexual allusions, from Khotan's "I will teach thee the ancient forgotten ways of pleasure" to Yasmela's dubious "It is not fitting that I come before the shrine clad in silk. I will go naked, on my knees, as befits a suppliant, lest Mitra deem I lack humility." As to the story's conclusion, Howard himself commented in a letter to Tevis Clyde Smith:

"My heroes grow more bastardly as the years pass. One of my latest sales concluded with a sexual intercourse instead of the usual slaughter. My sword-wielder grabbed the princess –

already considerably stripped by the villing [sic] – and smacked her down on the altar of the forgotten gods, while battle and massacre roared outside, and through the dusk the remains of the villing, nailed to the wall by the hero, regarded the pastime sardonically. I don't know how the readers will like it. I'll bet some of them will. The average man has a secret desire to be a swaggering, drunken, fighting, raping swashbuckler." (REH to TCS, circa December 1932, unpublished)

It is interesting to note that in the first draft, the story ended differently: For an instant he held her, then he shook himself free.

“Crom’s devils!” he grunted. “Some forty thousand men have perished today, and I linger here cuddling a whimpering chit of a girl! Here – put on some garment, and we’ll begone. There’s work to be done.”

It is arguable whether Howard himself was an “average man,” but when he submitted the story, Wright apparently had no complaints about the sex elements: his only quibble concerned the length of the story, which he probably felt was overworded. Howard himself had been reducing the length with each successive draft, and complied with Wright’s request. But the Texan seemed to have understood that the sexual elements helped sell his Conan stories. What Wright was objecting to, apparently, was “profane” dialogue much more than “evocative” scenes.

The next three Conan stories, *Iron Shadows in the Moon*, *Xuthal of the Dusk* and *The Pool of the Black One*, were written in that order – and in very short succession – between November and December of 1932. All three feature scantily-clad female characters, irresistibly attracted to the Cimmerian. All three sold immediately. With the exception of *The Frost-Giant’s Daughter* and *The Tower of the Elephant*, all previous Conan stories had gone through three or four drafts. In contrast, these three new stories required only two each, a rough and a final version. The sale of *Black Colossus* had convinced Howard that quality and strong characterization were not the essential elements when it came to selling a Conan story. Not surprisingly, *Black Colossus* was the first Conan story to be featured on the cover of Weird Tales, in the June 1933 issue, followed in September by *Xuthal of the Dusk* (published as *The Slithering Shadow*). It is amusing to note that neither cover features Conan, but instead portrays the women of the story, as nearly naked as the censors would allow. *The Pool of the Black One* appeared the following month, while the infinitely superior *Queen of the Black Coast* would not be published until the May 1934 issue. It is probably not a coincidence that Margaret Brundage, who excelled at depicting scantily-clad women, became Weird Tales’

regular cover artist in 1933.

Of these three routine Conan stories, *Xuthal of the Dusk* is the most interesting. Commenting on it to Clark Ashton Smith, Howard wrote: “It really isn’t as exclusively devoted to sword-slashing as the announcement might seem to imply.” The basic plot of the tale – Conan and a woman finding an isolated city peopled by decadent inhabitants and a wicked woman – would indeed be considerably enriched and developed in the future *Red*

Nails (July 1935). The theme had profound psychological resonance in Howard's psyche. In late 1932, however, Howard was not ready to give it the treatment it deserved, and *Xuthal of the Dusk* pales in comparison with the future Conan tale.

If it had taken only two drafts for Howard to complete his last few Conan tales, *Rogues in the House* – very probably written in January 1933 – went one step further. In January 1934, Howard wrote Clark Ashton Smith:

"Glad you liked 'Rogues in the House.' That was one of those yarns which seemed to write itself. I didn't rewrite it even once. As I remember I only erased and changed one word in it, and then sent it in just as it was written. I had a splitting sick headache, too, when I wrote the first half, but that didn't seem to affect my work any. I wish to thunder I could write with equal ease all the time. Ordinarily I revise even my Conan yarns once or twice, and the other stuff I hammer out by main strength."

Rogues in the House was the last Conan story to draw from Howard's interest in things Assyrian. By this time he was increasingly interested in the history and legendry of the American Southwest. Bran Mak Morn, Turlogh O'Brien, Cormac Mac Art, and Kull now belonged to Howard's literary past. In a few short months he would inaugurate his most successful series – commercially-speaking – the western-burlesque Breckinridge Elkins tales.

In April 1932, Howard was already telling Lovecraft: "I'm trying to invest my native regions with spectral atmosphere, etched against a realistic setting; 'The Horror from the Mound' in the current Weird Tales was a feeble effort of the sort." Other efforts in a similar vein were *The Man on the Ground* and *Old Garfield's Heart*, in both of which are mixed a Western background and a weird element.

In December 1932, Howard began corresponding with August W. Derleth, a writer of both weird stories and regionalist fiction, and the two men were soon exchanging tales and lore of their respective regions. In a letter postmarked December 29, 1932, Howard asked Derleth:

"You've heard perhaps of Quanah Parker, the great Comanche war chief, son of Petah Nocona and Cynthia Ann Parker?" Derleth probably hadn't, and requested Howard to recount the story.

Howard, like most Texans, was familiar with the story; still, he apparently did further research before replying. His lengthy letter to Derleth reads in part:

“In 1836, when the Texans were fighting for their freedom, the Comanches were particularly bold in raiding the scattered settlements, and it was in one of those raids that Fort Parker fell.

Seven hundred Comanches and Kiowas literally wiped it off the earth, with most of its inhabitants…. Fort Parker passed into oblivion, and among the women and children taken captive were Cynthia Anne Parker, nine years old, and her brother John, a child of six.

“They were not held by the same clans. John came to manhood as an Indian, but he never forgot his white blood. The sight of a young Mexican girl, Donna Juanity Espinosa, in captivity among the red men, wakened the slumbering heritage of his blood. He escaped from the tribe, carrying her with him, and they were married…..”

It was probably in the story of Cynthia Anne and John that Howard found the inspiration for his next Conan story, *The Vale of Lost Women* (written circa February 1933). In the story, Conan is said to have dwelt for several months among the Hyborian Age equivalent of African 409

tribes. In the village of Bajujh he discovers a white captive, Livia. Just like Cynthia Anne Parker, Livia had a brother – “This morning my brother was mutilated and butchered before me” – and she and her brother had been captured by a hostile tribe. And just as the sight of Donna Espinosa “wakened the slumbering heritage” in John’s blood, Livia wakens similar ethnocentric considerations in Conan: “I am not such a dog as to leave a white woman in the clutches of a black man.” From that moment on the stories diverge. Conan successfully vanquishes the unconvincing devil from the “Outer Dark,” then promises to send Lydia back to her people without, of course, marrying her.

Not surprisingly, the story failed to sell. If Howard was trying to discreetly infuse some of his growing interest in Western lore into the Conan stories, he was perhaps too subtle: it is impossible to detect the source without having access to peripheral documents. The powerful story of Cynthia Anne and John Parker was lost between the unconvincing supernatural threat and Livia’s penchant for nakedness. As to the racial overtones of the story, while the violent ethnocentricism of the tale is understandable when we recognize its origin in the nineteenth-century Anglo-Saxon settler viewpoint, with the

blacks standing in for Indians, it makes for unsettling reading for the modern audience. At any rate, Howard's first foray into the American Southwest version of the Hyborian Age was a failure, and it would be another year before he made another attempt.

The Vale of Lost Women was probably rejected by Wright, though no records survive regarding its submission. This rejection marked the end of Howard's first Conan period. He would not return to the character until late in 1933. In a little over a year, he had completed twelve Conan stories, selling nine. While the first tales had been, on the whole, well above average, the later stories showed a definite trend toward the formulaic. They were becoming the kind of stories Robert Bloch would condemn in the letter-pages of Weird Tales.

Of the nine accepted stories, only three had been published by the spring of 1933, and it would take more than a year for Wright to publish the others. It was time for Howard to concentrate on other markets. The Depression was hitting the pulp magazine industry hard, and it was becoming imperative for Howard to seek out new markets.

In May 1933, British publisher Denis Archer contacted Howard about a possible book publication in England. Howard chose a batch of his better stories and submitted the collection on June 15. Of the eight stories included, two were Conan tales: *The Tower of the Elephant* and *The Scarlet Citadel*. The meager number of Conan stories doesn't reflect Howard's poor opinion of them, but simply the fact that Weird Tales owned First Serial Rights to the Conan stories. Consequently, most of the Conan stories could not be included among those Howard submitted to another publisher. Since Weird Tales did not return typescripts after publication, Howard retyped *The Scarlet Citadel* from the Weird Tales appearance, slightly correcting his text in the process, and sent loose Weird Tales pages for *The Tower of the Elephant*. Not until January 1934 did he hear from Archer, rejecting the collection but suggesting that he submit a 410

novel instead.

It is difficult to assign a precise date to the Conan fragments that appear in this volume (pp. 405

and 407).

Both were written in 1933, the second after April 1933. It is tempting to see

them as false starts toward resuming the Conan series after a lapse of several months. In October 1933, Howard wrote to Clark Ashton Smith: “Wright has three more Conan yarns yet unpublished: ‘Iron Shadows in the Moon,’ ‘The Queen of the Black Coast,’ and ‘Rogues in the House.’ I’m at present working on another which I haven’t yet titled.” A few weeks later he wrote Smith:

“Wright recently accepted another Conan yarn, ‘The Devil in Iron.’ ”

The Devil in Iron, the first Conan story completed since *The Vale of Lost Women*, was not an entirely original effort, borrowing many elements from *Iron Shadows in the Moon*, written a year earlier. It was apparently taking Howard some time to re-immerse himself in the Cimmerian’s world after a long absence. As he once wrote to Clark Ashton Smith, concerning his characters: “suddenly I would find myself out of contact with the conception, as if the man himself had been standing at my shoulder directing my efforts, and had suddenly turned and gone away, leaving me to search for another character.”

In the spring of 1933, recognizing his need to expand his markets, Howard had retained Otis Adelbert Kline as his agent. Kline immediately asked him to try his hand at different genres to augment the chances for sales.

By the end of 1933, Howard was writing detective, boxing, historical, and western stories, and was also experimenting with longer lengths in his adventure stories. The routine Conan stories were several months behind him, and after a few half-hearted efforts to pick up the series anew, Howard was once again ready to write convincingly about the Cimmerian.

I am particularly indebted to Glenn Lord for his continued help and support, and for providing me with so many copies of Howard’s typescripts. Special thanks to Rusty Burke and Leo Grin for their comments and criticism.

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The Coming of Conan The Cimmerian

NOTES ON THE CONAN TYPESCRIPTS AND THE CHRONOLOGY

By Patrice Louinet

LIST OF THE EXTANT CONAN TYPESCRIPTS *(March 1932 - October 1933)* The final drafts of the stories published in Weird Tales were probably destroyed after the story was typeset, and thus are no longer extant.

Regarding the terminology used: a draft is “incomplete” when we are missing at least one page; it is “unfinished” when Howard didn’t finish the draft. Sometimes Howard would write a draft and rewrite only a portion of it; such drafts are subdivided with numerals (i.e., draft b2 recycles pages from draft b1). All drafts have been examined for the preparation of this volume.

We are particularly indebted to Glenn Lord for furnishing copies of the typescripts mentioned below, and to Glynn Crain and Robert Weinberg for copies of the typescripts sent to Robert H.

Barlow.

Cimmeria

– The only surviving typescript of this 32 line poem was not prepared by Howard; it was obtained from Emil Petaja, to whom Howard had sent the poem, and is presumed to be Petaja’s transcription. A listing of Howard’s poems, made after his death by agent Otis Adelbert Kline, gives the poem’s length as 33 lines.

The Phoenix on the Sword

– draft a, incomplete (pp. 1-23 of 24)

– draft b1, 27 pp.

– draft b2, incomplete (pp. 7-13, 27, 28a, 28b of 28; pp. 1-6 re-used from b1; 14-26 re-used in version sent to Weird Tales; p. 28a discarded in favor of 28b)

– draft b3, pp. 1-4, 9-10 (rewriting of chapter 1 and end of chapter 2, per Farnsworth Wright’s request)

– draft b4 (final - Weird Tales - version) [lost]

The Frost-Giant’s Daughter

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The Coming of Conan The Cimmerian

– draft a, 8 pp.

– draft b (final version), 9 pp. [later rewritten into non-Conan story *The Frost-King’s Daughter*]

The God in the Bowl

– draft a, untitled, 16 pp.

– draft b, 22 pp. (numbered 1-6, 8-23 in error)

– draft c (final version), 22 pp. + additional p. 8 discarded and immediately rewritten *The Tower of the Elephant*

– draft a, untitled, 22 pp.

– isolated p. 3 (probably discarded from final draft)

– draft b (final – Weird Tales – version) [lost]

The Scarlet Citadel

– synopsis, untitled, 1 p.

– draft a, untitled, diminishing to a synopsis, 19 pp.

– draft b, 39 pp. (numbered 1-8, 10-40 in error) [originally untitled; the title was added when Howard sent the typescript to Robert H. Barlow]

– notes for the aftermath of the battle of Shamu, 1 p.

– 4 pp. (numbered 32-35; probably discarded pp. from Weird Tales version)

– draft c (Weird Tales version) [lost]

– draft d (final version), 51 pp. [this typescript retyped from Weird Tales in mid-1933 (exists also as a carbon)]

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Queen of the Black Coast

– draft a, untitled and unfinished, ending with partial synopsis, 17 pp.

– draft b1, untitled, 33 pp.

– draft b2, pp. 16-35 of 35, (re-uses pp. 1-15 from draft b1)

– draft c (final – Weird Tales – version) [This typescript is reportedly extant and now in private hands; perhaps sent to Robert H. Barlow in May/Jun 1934]

Black Colossus

– synopsis, untitled, 1 p.

– draft a, 51 pp. [originally untitled, the title was added when Howard sent the typescript to Robert H. Barlow]

– draft b, untitled, 48 pp.

– draft c, incomplete (pp. 7-8, 34-42, 44; p. 44 probably discarded from final version, other pages probably rejected by Farnsworth Wright and rewritten to reduce the length of the story)

– draft d (final – Weird Tales – version) [lost]

Iron Shadows in the Moon

– draft a, 38 pp. (numbered 1-37 plus unnumbered page to be inserted p. 9) [originally untitled; the title was added when Howard sent the typescript to Robert H. Barlow]

– draft b (final – Weird Tales – version) [lost]

Xuthal of the Dusk

– draft a, untitled, 39 pp.

– draft b (final – Weird Tales – version) [lost]

The Pool of the Black One

The Coming of Conan The Cimmerian

– draft a, untitled, 33 pp. (numbered 1-7, 9-34 in error)

– draft b (final – Weird Tales – version) [lost]

Rogues in the House

– draft (final – Weird Tales – version) [lost]

The Vale of Lost Women

– draft a, untitled, 17 pp.

– draft b (final version), 21 pp.

The Devil in Iron

– draft a, untitled, 37 pp.

– draft b (final – Weird Tales – version) [lost]

The Hyborian Age

– draft a, untitled, 2 pp.

– draft b, untitled, 7 pp.

– draft c, incomplete (pp. 2-12 of 12)

– draft d (final – Lany Corp – version) [lost]

OTHER

Two maps of the Hyborian world

Untitled document (Hyborian names), 1 p.

Notes on Various Peoples of the Hyborian Age, 1 p.

Untitled synopsis (“A squad of Zamorian soldiers...”), 1 p.

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Untitled synopsis (“The setting: The city of Shumballa...”), 2 pp.

Untitled and unfinished draft (“The battlefield stretched silent...”), 3 pp.

Untitled and unfinished draft (“Amboola awakened slowly...”), 11 pp.

2. CHRONOLOGY OF THE STORIES

Few records of Howard's submissions and sales survive, and the Conan stories are no exception. It follows that the exact writing chronology has to be deduced rather than reproduced.

One could expect the order of the stories as published in Weird Tales to help, but – aside from the fact that the Conan stories were not all accepted by the magazine – the results can be quite misleading. For instance: although *The Hour of the Dragon* was published in late 1935-early 1936, it is well documented that Howard had completed it in May 1934; while *The Tower of the Elephant* sold before *The Scarlet Citadel*, it was published after the latter. These examples are far from unique, as will be demonstrated shortly. References in Howard's correspondence are fragmentary and sometimes vague, and Howard rarely mentioned unfinished or unsold tales to his correspondents.

Thus, the only way to establish the chronology is to rely on the study of the surviving drafts of the stories. Fortunately, the immense majority of these are now in Glenn Lord's collection. Mr.

Lord has graciously supplied us with this material. Additionally, copies of a few typescripts now in private hands were also generously supplied by their present owners.

Howard started writing professionally in 1921. As his typing and writing abilities improved, so too did the professionalism of his typescripts. For instance, up to mid-1932 Howard used capital letters to indicate text that should be rendered as italics, while from mid-1932 onward he would underline such text. A typescript with underlined words will thus have been written later than mid-1932. Another example: soon after Howard hired Otis Adelbert Kline as his agent in the spring of 1933, the Texan's final drafts began at the middle of the first page, rather than the top. This was undoubtedly a stylistic request made by Kline; hence, Howard typescripts which begin in the middle of the first page were typed after the hiring of Kline in the spring of 1933.

A close study of the drafts yields far more detailed revelations. For example, it appears Howard only started introducing chapters in his stories in late 1928. From late 1928 until late 1932, he used the following format: "Chapter .1." But in December 1932, Howard adopted a new presentation that dropped the word "chapter"; a chapter transition would thus be noted ".1.".

Still later, in March 1934, Howard changed to a "Chapter . 1 ." format.

Even more interesting discoveries are made by studying Howard's numerous idiosyncrasies and spelling errors. By carefully noting when Howard started using a correct spelling rather than an incorrect one, one can establish the time frame in which a particular typescript was written. For instance, Howard always spelled "conscious" (and all its derived forms) as

"concious" until March 1932. The first three drafts of *The Phoenix on the Sword* and the third of *The Hyborian Age* have the incorrect spelling, thus were composed before that date. Other examples abound: Howard spelled "horizon" as "horrizon" until early 1931, the verbs

"envelop" and "develop" as "envelope" and "develope" until September 1932, and the word

"divide" (formerly spelled "devide") first appears in its correct form in a letter received July 13, 1932 by H.P. Lovecraft. Howard did not double the "n" in words ending in "-ness," such as

"barrenness," "drunkenness," or "suddenness," until November 1932. This particular observation proved that *Iron Shadows in the Moon* was written before *The Pool of the Black One*.

There exist in fact about thirty such idiosyncrasies or errors. Once these were identified, there only remained the easy, if tedious and time-consuming, task of systematically checking for their respective appearances and disappearances. As stated before, the results are fragmentary, but between their fairly large number and the other clues described above, it becomes possible to establish the exact chronology of all the completed stories and to establish their writing dates within a two-month span at the maximum. The method also proved reliable enough to date the unfinished Conan tales, synopses and fragments. The following is an example of these combined techniques at work.

Queen of the Black Coast, published in Weird Tales in May 1934, was previously believed to have been composed during the second half of 1933. By applying the above methods to the surviving typescripts, a much different conclusion is reached. First, two names found in the drafts for this story suggest an earlier date: we find "Cush," which Howard later spelled

“Kush,” and “Nilus,” which was later changed to “Styx.” Second, the chapter-numbering pattern (e.g., “Chapter .1.”) reveals that this tale was composed before December 1932. Third, the fact that some words are underlined establishes that the story was written after *The Scarlet Citadel* (Spring 1932). Additionally, with four instances of an incorrectly spelled “-ness” word, it is clear that the story predates *The Pool of the Black One* (November 1932). Going still further, both the second and third drafts have the word “envelop” spelled incorrectly as

“envelope”; Howard consistently spelled this word correctly beginning with a letter to H. P.

Lovecraft in September 1932, so the drafts must have been written before that date. Finally, this tale has a correctly spelled “divide”: the first instance of this spelling in another Howard composition was in a July 13, 1932 letter (as noted above). Thus we conclude that all the drafts of *Queen of the Black Coast* were written between July 13 and September 1932, a full year earlier than previously thought.

NOTES ON THE ORIGINAL HOWARD TEXTS

The texts for this edition of Volume 1 of the Complete Conan of Cimmeria were prepared by Patrice Louinet, Rusty Burke and Dave Gentzel, with assistance from Glenn Lord. The stories have been checked either against Howard’s original typescripts, copies of which were furnished by Glenn Lord, or the first published appearance if a typescript was unavailable.

Drafts of Howard’s stories, when extant, have also been checked to ensure the greatest accuracy. Every effort has been made to present the work of Robert E. Howard as faithfully as possible.

Deviations from the original sources are detailed in these textual notes. In the following pages, page, line and word number are given as follows: 67.5.6, indicating page 67, fifth line, sixth word. Story titles, chapter numbers and titles, and breaks before and after chapter headings, titles and illustrations are not counted; in the poem, only text lines are counted. The page/line number will be followed by the reading in the original source, or a statement indicating the type of change made. Punctuation changes are indicated by giving the immediately preceding word followed by the original punctuation.

Cimmeria

No original Howard typescript survives. Text taken from a typescript provided by Glenn Lord, probably prepared by Emil Petaja to whom Howard sent the poem in December 1934. 3.25.5: everylasting.

The Phoenix on the Sword

Originally appeared in Weird Tales, December 1932. Weird Tales' "Thoth-Amon" has been replaced throughout with Howard's spelling: "Thoth-amon." 17.19.6: star.

The Frost-Giant's Daughter

Text taken from Howard's original typescript, provided by Glenn Lord. Howard's typewriter not allowing ligatures, "AEsir" has been rendered as "*Æ*sir" throughout. 31.18.15: no quotation mark after "Heimdul."; 32.9.1: suporting; 32.20.1: what; 32.20.3: her; 32.28.5: dazzingly; 34.11.1: barrarian's; 34.20.1: crystaline; 34.33.14: the; 36.19.3: too; 36.20.9: no quotation mark after "again."; 36.21.2: wont; 36.35.13: no comma after "mountains."

The God in the Bowl

Text taken from Howard's original typescript, provided by Glenn Lord. 41.5.12: nitches; 418

The Coming of Conan The Cimmerian

42.1.2: didnt; 42.17.2: didnt; 42.29.5: dont; 43.7.8: amswered; 43.10.7: murderered; 43.34.8: independant; 44.1.11: net-works; 44.8.2: its; 44.22.3: its; 44.23.6: Lets; 44.34.13: Dont; 45.25.12: didnt; 45.30.3: stubborn; 46.13.15: dont; 46.23.8: no comma after "men"; 46.27.4: dont; 46.28.8: corden; 46.28.15: no quotation mark after "it."; 47.13.5: isnt; 47.14.2: havent; 48.18.2: didnt; 48.23.5: period instead of question mark after "stay"; 48.26.2: dont; 48.30.2: dont; 48.30.5: dont; 48.33.6: no comma after "who"; 48.37.9: wouldnt; 49.9.1: Dont; 49.32.12: period instead of question mark after "secrecy"; 49.38.1: procede; 50.6.9: heiroglyphics; 51.11.4: Its; 51.16.2: heiroglyphs; 51.25.9: Its; 51.28.5: groves; 51.28.8: heiroglyphics; 52.19.2: didnt; 52.24.3: whither; 52.28.13: nitche; 54.3.9: couldnt; 54.11.10: Its; 54.13.3: couldnt; 54.17.1: Its; 54.20.4: Its; 54.20.13: couldnt; 54.27.12: every; 54.28.6: didnt; 54.30.6: cant; 54.37.2: heiroglyphic; 55.31.10: Dont; 55.32.5: "ne phew"; 56.2.10: villianous; 56.7.12: didnt; 56.14.1: wouldnt; 56.15.6: We;

56.31.13: perfect's; 57.37.7: cushes.

The Tower of the Elephant

Originally appeared in Weird Tales, March 1933. No changes have been made for this edition.

The Scarlet Citadel

Text taken from Howard’s original typescript, provided by Glenn Lord. 86.25.1: lived; 86.37.7: king; 88.33.1: swordsmen; 89.10.4: “of” repeated; 90.25.2: it; 91.34.13: “his” absent from original; 92.25.1: Skukeli. 94.40.12: ristling. 95.7.3: comma after “darkness”; 95.40.12: im; 97.16.3: pouding; 97.23.6: laugher; 97.26.12: no comma after “gloating”; 97.29.12: no comma after “killer”; 98.3.8: period instead of comma after “carefully”; next word “Lest” changed accordingly to “lest”; 98.26.14: no semi-colon after “him”; 99.31.2: vibsible; 100.1.5: slaving; 100.25.8: brances; 100.26.2: comma after “body”; 101.1.11: “a” repeated; 103.8.11: “corner of” repeated; 106.3.1: Poitainians; 106.12.5: five’s; 106.25.2: no comma after “marble”; 106.37.4: father; 107.19.10: roayl; 108.15.4: “at” not in original; 108.21.4: “conditions”

followed by a period instead of a comma; 108.30.6: procalmation; 109.3.6: wirthing; 109.4.7: wenches of; 110.6.12: greasure; 110.28.1: beleagured; 111.19.3: throgh; 111.20.6: brrowed; 111.20.8: miles; 112.25.5: grat; 112.27.1: ecstacy; 113.12.3: Tsotah; 113.26.16: any; 113.29.4: very; 113.37.11: “army” repeated; 117.29.9: aprt; 118.21.1: sky-ward.

Queen of the Black Coast

Originally appeared in Weird Tales, May 1934. 122.15.11: bowman; 127.27.7: anaswered; 132.33.4: warrior’s; 136.17.4: back; 140.13.8: Howl; 140.24.13: re.

Black Colossus

Originally appeared in Weird Tales, June 1933. 177.30.3: particuluar.

Iron Shadows in the Moon

Originally appeared in Weird Tales, April 1934 under the title “Shadows in the Moonlight.”

204.20.3: dropped.

Xuthal of the Dusk

Originally appeared in Weird Tales, September 1933 under the title “The Slithering Shadow.”

229.11.7: question mark instead of period after “me”; 229.26.3: non-committally.

The Pool of the Black One

Originally appeared in Weird Tales, October 1933. No changes have been made for this edition.

Rogues in the House

Originally appeared in Weird Tales, January 1934. 284.32.4: labyrinthin; 287.10.1: single quote instead of double quote before “In”; 290.7.7: “warn ing”.

The Vale of Lost Women

Text taken from Howard’s original typescript, provided by Glenn Lord. The typescript has a number of editing marks on it, not in Howard’s hand, which makes some readings of the punctuation conjectural. 303.13.2: crystalized; 304.7.10: eye-balls; 304.7.13: fire-light; 304.19.8: “a an”; 304.40.11: automoton; 305.15.1: semi-colon instead of comma after “stool”; 305.39.12: period instead of comma after “stool”; 306.5.13: exceded; 306.7.12: “High strapped”; 306.27.7: “snor ing”; 307.1.5: period instead of comma after “hand”; 307.31.11: futiley; 308.26.8: existant; 308.27.13: comma after “indeed”; 308.31.10: extra space between the double quote and “and”; 309.23.6: set; 310.19.5: colon after “exultant”; 311.5.13: wholesale; 311.28.14: period instead of comma after “boma”; 312.1.1: Liva; 312.10.2: with; 313.5.12: Balakas; 313.22.2: reitterated; 314.7.12: supply; 314.10.6: stroke; 316.18.15: torchlight; 316.38.11: “where ever”; 317.8.5: period instead of comma after “embarrassed.”

The Devil in Iron

Originally appeared in Weird Tales, August 1934. No changes have been made for this edition.

The Phoenix on the Sword (first submitted draft)

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Howard completed three drafts of *The Phoenix on the Sword* before he was satisfied with it.

This third version ran 28 pages and was submitted to Weird Tales in early March 1932. A few days later, the editor, Farnsworth Wright, asked for some rewriting before accepting the tale: “I hope you will see your way clear to touch it up and resubmit it. It is the first two chapters that do not click. The story opens rather uninterestingly, it seems to me, and the reader has difficulty in orienting himself. The first chapter ends well, and the second chapter begins superbly; but after King Conan’s personality is well established, the chapter sags from too much writing. I think the very last page of the whole story might be re-written with advantage; because it seems a little weak after the stupendous events that precede it.” Howard followed Wright’s suggestions to the word, rewriting only the first two chapters and the beginning of the third, totaling 13 pages, and the last two pages of his story. Since Wright had no objection to pages 14 to 26, Howard simply resent them with the new ones. The 15 rejected pages – most of which have Wright’s editorial markings on them – were relegated to Howard’s archives. The text presented in this edition is thus comprised of Howard’s first thirteen rejected pages (ending with the word “only,” page 362, line 37), followed by the Weird Tales text up to page 372, line 31. Line 32 onward are taken from Howard’s draft. Weird Tales’ “Thoth-Amon” has been replaced with Howard’s “Thoth-amon” and Howard’s “AEsir” with “Æsir.” 353.4.15: no comma after “fat”; 353.5.7: petulent; 353.10.5: unconciously; 353.14.16: petulently; 353.37.1: no comma after “I”; 353.37.13: covenented; 354.4.1: no period after “giant” (typed to right edge of paper); 354.8.2: fade; 354.14.5: Seneschal; 354.36.5: “pala ce”; 354.40.13: string (typed to right edge of paper); 355.17.13: every; 356.7.1: stubborness; 356.16.7: villian; 356.18.5: no punctuation after “him” (typed to right edge of paper); 356.32.4: your’s; 357.1.6:

“an swered”; 357.19.17: procede; 357.20.14: Dont; 359.12.14: its; 360.12.2: Its; 360.30.7: vainess; 361.3.5: meaninglesness; 361.13.5: concious; 361.14.7: sylus; 372.35.8: it; 373.24.15: knee (typed to right edge of paper); 373.29.10: “sword” followed by a period instead of a question mark.

Notes on Various Peoples of the Hyborian Age.

Text taken from Howard's original typescript, provided by Glenn Lord. No changes have been made for this edition.

The Hyborian Age

Originally appeared in The Hyborian Age, Lany Corp, 1938. The booklet's "AEsir" has been rendered as "Æsir" throughout. 382.25.1: ThePicts; 384.26.8: impetous; 384.39.7: impetuous; 385.4.4: this; 385.26.3: Thr; 386.13.4: nothern; 386.36.3: "inter-married" hyphenated at line-break; 388.18.3: subjuction; 389.32.7: an; 390.19.6: "war-path" hyphenated at line break; 391.1.5: agression; 392.14.9: seem; 392.16.6: auxilaries; 393.8.4: mutined; 393.14.1: inexhaustable; 394.34.2. in; 397.13.5: "or" not in original; 397.26.2: primitives; 398.04.1:

"pure blooded."

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Untitled synopsis (A squad of Zamorian soldiers…)

Text taken from Howard's original typescript, provided by Glenn Lord. No changes have been made for this edition.

Untitled synopsis (The Scarlet Citadel)

Text taken from Howard's original typescript, provided by Glenn Lord. No changes have been made for this edition.

Untitled synopsis (Black Colossus)

Text taken from Howard's original typescript, provided by Glenn Lord. No changes have been made for this edition.

Untitled fragment (The battlefield stretched silent…) Text taken from Howard's original typescript, provided by Glenn Lord. No changes have been made for this edition.

Untitled synopsis (The setting: The city of Shumballa…) Text taken from Howard's original typescript, provided by Glenn Lord. No changes have been

made for this edition.

Untitled fragment (Amboola awakened slowly…)

Text taken from Howard's original typescript, provided by Glenn Lord. No changes have been 422

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made for this edition.

List of Hyborian Names and Countries

Document provided by Glenn Lord. No changes have been made for this edition.

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For encouragement and material support, my thanks to Jim Keegan, David Burton, Valentyna Shemchuk, Jack and Barbara Baum, Steve Kammer, Al Williamson, Judith Hope Hansen, and my father, Joseph H. Schultz. Thanks to Gary Gianni for setting the bar high.Thanks as always to Denise for keeping the home fires burning; I love you. Special thanks to Marcelo Anciano and Michael and Paul Berrow for the opportunity, and for their patience.

Mark Schultz

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Patrice Louinet

Thanks to Charlie Williams for introducing me to Conan, all those years ago; to Jim Myers for getting my collection off to a good start; to the members of

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Rusty Burke

I would like to thank Marcelo, Patrice and Rusty for being a pleasure to work with and Mark for making Conan and his world look real and believable. Thanks also to Mandy for trying not to glaze over when I talk about REH, Fishburn Hedges for kindly allowing me to use their design studio after hours and at weekends and, finally, to my old mate and fellow Howard enthusiast, Mike Rollins: *Hey, Mike! Look! Your name's in a Conan book!*

Stuart Williams

I would like to dedicate the creation of this book to Glenn Lord. Thank you.

Marcelo Anciano

PRAISE FOR ROBERT E. HOWARD

"I adore these books. Howard had a gritty, vibrant style—broadsword writing that cut its way to the heart, with heroes who are truly larger than life. I heartily recommend them to anyone who loves fantasy."

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Author of *Legend* and *White Wolf*

"The voice of Robert E. Howard still resonates after decades with readers—equal parts ringing steel, thunderous horse hooves, and spattered blood. Far from being a stereotype, his creation of Conan is the high heroic adventurer. His raw muscle and sinews, boiling temper, and lusty laughs are the gauge by

which all modern heroes must be measured.”

—ERIC NYLUND

Author of *Halo: The Fall of Reach*

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the *Elric* saga

“In this, I think, the art of Robert E. Howard was hard to surpass: vigor, speed, vividness. And always there is that furious, galloping narrative pace.”

—POUL ANDERSON

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‘This is how life really was lived in those former savage times!’ ”

—DAVID DRAKE

Author of *Grimmer Than Hell* and

Dogs of War

“For headlong, nonstop adventure and for vivid, even florid, scenery, no one even comes close to Howard.”

—HARRY TURTLEDOVE

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The Coming of Conan the Cimmerian is a work of fiction. Names, places, and incidents either are products of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously.

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Cimmeria

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The Phoenix on the Sword

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The Frost-Giant's Daughter

Original version first published Rogues in the House, Donald M. Grant, 1976

The God in the Bowl

Original version first published The Tower of the Elephant, Donald M. Grant, 1975

The Tower of the Elephant

first published Weird Tales, March 1933

The Scarlet Citadel

first published Weird Tales, January 1933

Queen of the Black Coast

first published Weird Tales, May 1934

Black Colossus

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The Coming of Conan The Cimmerian

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Iron Shadows in the Moon

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first published Weird Tales, October 1933

Rogues in the House

first published Weird Tales, January 1934

The Vale of Lost Women

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The Devil in Iron

first published Weird Tales, August 1934

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